



Alpha Bride

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Category: Romance, Paranormal

Description: The Alpha despised and rejected me. Now I'm forced to marry him.

He gave me the night of my life, before he found out that I'm a lowly witch—without powers.

He rejected me and broke something inside of me. And now he's breaking it even further:

I'm forced to be his mate. And as a bonus, he takes my innocence and knocks me up.

How do you get up when you're tripped? How do you heal when you've been broken?

I don't know, but somehow I did. Until fate strikes again.

Since I'm considered worthless, I'm offered up as a bride to secure our alliance with the wolves.

And when he hears this, his Alpha wolf roars to life and claims me.

But this time, I'm not going to be bullied and humiliated by him.

If he wants to make our marriage a living hell, I'll make sure to return the favor.

I just didn't know his hell meant that he'd reduce my virgin body to a whimpering mess.

And I didn't know it meant that he'd take care of me so thoroughly that I can't help but want more.

Will the Alpha King claim his mate and baby for good?

The Alphas of Alpha King Island are brothers who rule their lands ruthlessly. Their mates are the only ones who find out that beneath the rough fur is a man who will burn down the world to protect the one he loves...

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Prologue - Emily

I have always been an outsider. Too human for witches, too witch for humans. Isolated with no magic and raised in a coven that sees power as everything. As the very essence of our ability to survive and thrive. It will never matter how hard I work, how many potions or runes I perfect through study, or how many times I have to swallow my pride—without practical magic, I'm nothing to them; just an obligation.

So, when Cassie, the healer, sends me out alone to gather herbs near the shifter borders, I'm not going to argue. It's easier this way. Easier to be ignored than to be reminded, yet again, that I don't belong while they complete another initiation ceremony that doesn't involve me.

But now, as I crouch in the undergrowth, fingers deep in the damp mossy earth, the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. With several low, guttural growls rumbling through the trees, I realize that my inability to be an actual witch is going to be my rather obvious downfall. I'm as defenseless and pathetic as they all say I am.

I crouch lower and hold my breath, hoping whoever is out there is only passing by and not as threatening as they seem. I may not have any practical magic, but my rune-binding skills are second to none. I reach into my bag and feel for the smoothed black rune I always carry with me for protection. The ridges feel reassuring under my fingertips as I sink further into the soft moss.

The growling stops for a moment.

I exhale a shaky breath, fingers still clenched around the rune. The silence stretches

on like an unraveling coil of yarn. Slowly, so as not to rustle the leaves and give away my position, I begin to stand slightly, intending to make my way down the ravine to find more cover amongst the trees.

However, before I can even get to my feet, a hand closes over my mouth, and a muscled arm hauls me backward into a crushing hold.

“What do we have here?” a voice with rancid breath laughs against my ear. He sniffs my hair, making my stomach twist, and turns me around to face his friends emerging from the shadows. “No wolf...a witch, maybe.”

“Nah,” one with long, dirty hair and a scar on his face mutters, “there’s no magic on her.”

Considering the seriousness of my situation, the comment shouldn’t even register, and yet it still stings. The shifters glance at one another, and my blood runs cold.

“She could still be fun,” the first one growls, leering at me.

I know without a doubt that I’m not leaving this forest alive if I can’t get away from them. From the looks of it, they’re rogues completely unbound by a moral code or an alpha—dangerous. Everyone knows the island has been in turmoil since the old alpha died, and the pack was split into three, with each of his sons becoming an alpha in their own right.

Marian, our high priestess, keeps saying all will be well when the shifters settle. Personally, I think that’s taking too long. Ralph may have been a cruel leader, but he respected the witches—or rather, he feared them, which was good enough. With the packs in flux and these new alphas seemingly struggling to get a grip on the new power dynamics, the rogues have gone, well...more rogue.

There have been more attacks and more violence, and, as usual, the witches are the target. I briefly consider that it is probably why they sent me out here today. Am I simply more expendable?

But now isn't the time for self-pity or recriminations. I need to get out of here.

Darkness will be creeping in soon, and I'm no match for shifters at the best of times. I close my eyes and channel everything I have into my one chance—the rune in my hand. It warms against my skin as I picture a distraction, anything to buy me time. The rune activates just as it's supposed to, with a zap of electricity that doesn't affect me but sends the hulking shifter stumbling back. His grip loosens just enough for me to break free, and when the others step back in surprise, I don't hesitate.

I bolt through the trees, my heart pounding in my chest like a drum as twigs snap and leaves crunch under my feet, betraying my every move. I keep the rune in my hand, knowing it won't work again for a little while, but I need it ready just in case. Behind me, the shifters' growls fill the air; they're closing in fast. My lungs burn as panic begins to set in, adrenaline-fueled fear propelling me forward.

Just as I start to think I can't run any more, a root catches me off guard and sends me tumbling to the ground. I crack my head on something hard as I fall and lie there, winded and dazed. I know it's over. There's nowhere left to run, and I've no more energy left to give. The rune in my hand is still lifeless, and as I see the first shifter come into view, I feel oddly resigned to my fate; I close my eyes and wait for the end to come.

Even when I hear shouting and then a crash of bodies, I still don't open my eyes. Are they fighting over who gets to kill me first?

Dying here in the cold, dark forest seems oddly fitting. Alone, like I always have been.

But as I wait for the inevitable, I realize something else is happening. There's more shouting, and then someone grabs my shoulders and pulls me upright. I whimper as pain shoots through my body, but when I open my eyes, I see someone unexpected. Not one of the rogues from before, not a rogue at all by the looks of him—a massive figure blocking out the early twilight with his broad frame. He looks at me with concern etched into every line of his face, his deep brown eyes scanning me up and down, apparently taking in every cut and bruise.

Before I can speak or even react, he growls in the direction of the rogues who attacked me. They hesitate for a moment before grabbing their injured friend and backing off. Witnessing this stranger's power over them, It's then that I realize he's not just any shifter; he's an alpha. My stomach drops to my feet as I wonder which one. My coven exists on the boundary of the new western and mountain packs, but I don't know much about the new alphas. Only that they're inexperienced and trying to rule differently from Ralph's reign of terror. No one mentioned they were also incredibly handsome.

He looks at me again, taking in my shaking form and the rune gripped in my hand, before finally speaking. "You're hurt," he says simply, his voice deep and rough like gravel against skin.

"I-I..." I stammer.

He looks at the rune again, and something like disgust flashes across his face before he lifts his piercing gaze, seeming to study me more closely. "I don't sense any magic," he mutters almost accusingly before adding, "so why the rune?"

"Protection," I reply, lifting my chin. "It worked a treat."

We stare at each other for a moment before I notice his lips smirk slightly and then break into a smile that transforms his entire face.

It's like a light has been switched on in the darkness of his expression. The corners of his eyes crinkle as he lets out a small, warm, rich chuckle, and I find myself smiling back in spite of everything.

"Well then," he says, looking around before turning back to me. "I guess I owe that entire victory to you, then."

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His humor is infectious, and I find myself smiling despite the lingering pain wracking my body. When I wince as my ribs hurt, he immediately looks concerned again. "Do you live far? We need to get you home before it gets too dark."

I shake my head. "Just over by the Emmersons' farm," I say.

The Emmersons gifted my coven some land years ago, and we've lived on the edge of the border town ever since.

He nods. "I know the Emmersons. Good folk," he says, placing a large hand around my waist to steady me as I start walking. As soon as he touches me, I feel it. A warmth that spreads throughout my whole body. It begins slowly, where his hand is touching my skin through the thin fabric of my dress, but then creeps outward until my whole body is bathed in golden warmth. My eyes flicker to his, and I realize that he must feel it, too, because we both stand there, seemingly lost for words, wrapped in an invisible embrace.

The silence stretches on until he lifts his other hand and smooths some of my auburn hair from my face. The small action leaves goosebumps racing across my skin. I physically can't tear my eyes away from his amber gaze, stunned by the sensations flooding my body. He brushes his thumb along my cheekbone, sending shivers down my spine.

"You have the most beautiful eyes," he whispers before leaning in closer, his breath tickling my sensitive skin.

I gasp and shut my eyes at the unexpected sensation, another shiver running down my

back. He chuckles softly against my skin before gently kissing my neck. His warm lips move slowly down as I breathe in his unique and manly scent; having never been this close to a man before, it feels overwhelming. My body aches for more as he continues to trail his mouth along my jawline, nipping lightly at my skin.

I can feel my body begin to tremble, and he pulls away slightly, causing me to make a sound of disappointment. He chuckles darkly, his hair falling into his eyes as he looks down at me, something unreadable in his expression. He pauses, almost warring with himself, before I see the resignation in his eyes. "Forgive me."

I don't have time to ask for what before his lips crash down onto mine—a searing kiss, my first, that completely takes my breath away. I don't know what I'm doing, but as his tongue sweeps into my mouth, I respond instinctively, mimicking his movements. Our tongues dance together, tasting and teasing. It feels like an eternity before he pulls away, leaving me breathless.

"I should get you home," he says gruffly, his voice ragged. "I don't think I can control myself if I don't." As he speaks, his hand slides down to cup my ass, and he pulls me close. When he kisses me again, it's even more intense than before, his free hand tangling in my hair as I reach up and cling to his strong, broad shoulders. I moan into the kiss, never wanting it to end.

When we finally break apart again, he appears as shaken as I am. I'm dimly aware that he must have lifted me off the ground as he slowly lowers me back down, still holding me close. The silence is deafening for a moment, but he clears his throat and looks slightly sheepish as he meets my gaze. "I apologize," he says, suddenly looking more boyish. "You've been through enough without me accosting you like this. I'm sorry, I don't know what came over me."

I shake my head, intensely aware of the blush creeping over my face. "N-no, it's fine," I whisper.

He nods, and then, glancing around the now-dark forest, he adds, “Let me get you home. But I want to see you again. Is that okay?”

I know I’m beaming as I nod; he smiles, too, and we begin walking the trail leading to the Emmersons’. He holds my arm, presumably to help me walk, but all it does is keep my body on edge. I long for him to kiss me again. Instead, we talk and laugh. He tells me his name is Tristen and confirms he’s the alpha of the new western pack. Our stories flow easily, and although the walk only takes just over an hour, by the time I see Emmersons’ farmhouse in the distance, I can sense my life is about to change forever. He’s in the middle of telling me a funny story about his youngest brother, Aiden, when we reach the crossroads. Tristen looks confused for a moment when I turn to follow the path leading away from the farmhouse.

“Don’t you live in the farmhouse?” he asks.

I shake my head. “No, my coven lives on the edge of the farm. We’re actually right on the border with Aiden’s pack.”

As soon as the words have left my mouth, I sense the change in him. He immediately drops his hand and steps back. “You lying fucking witch,” he snaps, causing me to stumble back physically. “How did you do it? How did you hide your magic?”

My stomach drops as I take in the change in him. Suddenly scared, my hand instinctively goes for the rune. Something he notices causes his expression to get harder. “I-I haven’t done anything.”

“Of course not,” he scoffs. “You just happened to make me kiss you after I just happened to be there to save you. It was probably all a ruse, wasn’t it? Unbelievable.”

I can feel my heart shattering as my brain tries to catch up with what he’s saying. “I-I haven’t done anything, Tristen. I tho—”

He cuts me off before I can say anything else, stepping forward menacingly. “Run, witch, before I change my mind.”

The threat is clear, and I try to fight the tears, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of seeing how broken I am. I turn and walk away, feeling his eyes on me the whole time, not knowing if he’s going to attack. When I reach the top of the hill, I finally glance back, but he’s gone. I stand there in the cold, dark lane, feeling as empty as the night.

Feeling stupid that I actually thought he was something amazing. That something amazing could happen to me. A cry that almost sounds like a laugh escapes my lips at the thought that my coven rejects me because I’m not a real witch, and Tristen has just rejected me because he thinks I am one.

And that will be my life.

Chapter 1 - Tristen

The alpha conference is already in full swing by the time I approach the clearing. Aiden offered to convene the council, and judging by the security protocols surrounding the area as we came in, he’s gone all out to make sure the event is safe from Malik’s rogue attacks.

That means one thing: fucking witches.

It’s not that I don’t see the benefits of using them. They’ve proven their worth in the fight against Malik. Hell, my pack has probably taken in more than my brothers’ due to the remote locations of some of the covens, ensuring their safety in exchange for cooperation. The witches can use their runes and spells, but they’re too vulnerable and slow in gathering supplies to protect themselves effectively. With our help and shifter strength, we’ve been able to create a protection system that benefits us all.

You'd think they'd be grateful, but witches don't seem to know the meaning of the word. They're always complaining about something. Apparently, we don't give them enough respect, housing, or attention...

They're lucky we're trusting them to live around us at all.

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All this cooperation also means that I've been seeing her again. I'd avoided running into Emily ever since she bewitched me in the forest two years ago. I was younger then, a new alpha, and clearly too soft. The magic was undeniable. The moment I held her, my wolf was powerless against her. Old Ralph was a sick bastard, but he'd been right about the witches—I was lucky to escape then, and I won't make the same mistake again.

It's frankly galling the way Callum and Ava have practically rolled out the red carpet for her. She and Ava seem pretty tight these days. I've made my feelings pretty clear, but Callum seems happy to let that woman close to his family. He even claims she has no practical magic, which I know from experience is an outright lie.

"Looks like we're late to the party," my beta, Ryan, mutters as we reach the small stage that has been constructed near a large central bonfire.

My brothers are both already here with their betas. I spot Callum talking to Ava and nod in greeting as we move through the small crowd. I also spot several of the witches that have been invited to attend milling around, my eyes scanning the crowd until I find her. Emily. I just knew she'd be here. Her red hair dazzles in the sunlight, and I watch as she laughs at something one of the other women from Callum's pack says, her whole damn face lighting up. She has her feet well under the table in his pack now. She's helping with their rune updates and trialing new spells. Plus, she seems to have made friends with Ava and some of the other women.

Can't say I didn't warn him.

Tearing my eyes away from Emily is physically difficult, so much so that I

sometimes wonder if some of her bewitching magic has lingered.

I force myself to turn toward Ryan, who is scanning the crowd, too. He was ambushed by rogues a few weeks ago on patrol. His scars are healing, but I can see he's more tense than usual. "There's no party without us," I tell him. "Why don't you grab some beers, and I'll meet you at the stage. Got to say hi to Aiden."

He nods and heads off for the drinks, looking pensive. These damn rogues operating under Malik's control are taking their toll on everyone. I'm frustrated. Witches and their runes are holding the majority of attacks at bay, and certainly blocking Malik from entering too deeply into our territories, but it's not enough. Nowhere near enough. We need to take him out. But we're no closer to figuring out how.

I know my brothers share my frustrations, as apparently do the witches who demanded to be part of this meeting. Aiden notices my approach and jumps down from the small stage to greet me with a brief hug. The past couple of years have seen his youth and exuberance tempered and refined into something far more worthy of a leader. I'm impressed with how he's running the mountain pack. His only downfall appears to be how much trouble he causes with women. Though perhaps I'm only jealous because ever since that bewitching, I can't seem to find it in myself to look at anyone other than that conniving, beautiful redhead.

I shake the thought away and clap my younger brother on the back. "Sorry, we're late," I say. "Ready to get started?"

Aiden laughs. "I'll let you off if you can bring this crowd to order. Just need Callum and Marian."

I roll my eyes at the high priestess's name. She's a royal pain in the ass. "Seriously, I don't know why we're involving them to this degree," I snap as Aiden rolls his eyes. "I know, I know, their magic is helping. But at what cost? We've always lived

separately, and it's worked fine."

Aiden scoffs. "Sure. We'll just ask them to supply their magic and then go back out into the forest to fight off Malik and his growing hoard of rogues all on their own. I'm sure they'd be more than happy to help."

His sarcasm grates, but I don't bother replying because Callum and Marian are already walking over, deep in conversation. I'll never understand why Callum doesn't see the truth about them. Ralph had so many stories about how duplicitous they were growing up. He wasn't right about many things, but everything I've seen of the witches tells me he was spot-on about them. Callum was always so determined to be nothing like our father that he's blind to it.

"Good to see you, bro," Callum says as we bump fists.

I turn and nod politely at Marian. Whatever my personal views, I can still be diplomatic to a point. "Let's get this show on the road," I say as we take to the stage.

Aiden was right; getting a crowd from three packs and a bunch of witches under control is a challenge, but soon enough, a hush falls over the clearing, and I begin to outline why we've called the alpha council. Too many rumors persist about which packs are doing what, what our progress is, and what we plan to do next. The council affords each alpha the chance to be publically transparent about their recent experiences and any progress in finding Malik.

Turning slightly to gesture toward Marian, I add, "And the witches can speak on their progress. I'm sure we all look forward to that."

Marian clearly doesn't miss the ice in my tone as she glares almost straight through me. Her almost white blonde hair and green eyes create a magical contrast that sets my nerves on edge even more than her deathly stare.

“Quite,” she replies with a smile that looks as sincere as my own.

Aiden clears his throat. “So,” he starts. “Let’s begin with the recent attacks. I’ll go first.”

We all listen to Aiden recount that the mountain pack has suffered a few minor attacks along their sea border, but nothing critical. It does raise the issue that the number of rogues appears to be reinforced by strangers coming in from the mainland. Hired fighters or devoted followers, we’re not sure. I bite back a growl as I listen to Aiden and consider how under threat our island sanctuary really is.

Finally, it’s my turn. I force myself to keep my voice level as I speak: “Our pack was attacked three nights ago. We lost two good men, including one of our oldest betas, George.” The silence that falls over the clearing is like ice water as everyone processes what I’ve said. Even Marian looks genuinely saddened for a moment before schooling her features into something more neutral.

“That’s terrible news,” Callum says, and I can hear the concern in his voice. He steps forward and places a hand on my shoulder in sympathy. It’s a small gesture, but it means a lot. “George was a good man. Any loss is terrible.”

I nod, grateful for his support. “We’ve found no trace of Malik yet, but we continue to scour the forest. We’ll gladly take the fight to him rather than wait.” I pause for a moment. “Now, about the witches...” I trail off, daring Marian to interrupt me.

But she surprises everyone by speaking first. “Some of our youngest have vanished,” she says quietly. Her voice is filled with thinly veiled anger. “We fear they’ve been taken captive. Not killed. Captured.”

The air around us seems to thicken with tension so palpable you could cut it with a knife. I find myself instinctively scanning the crowds for the familiar red hair. She’s

deep in conversation with Ava and her other friend. Somehow, I can always seem to read her like a book, and right now, she looks on edge.

“Captured?” Aiden echoes, his voice deeper than usual with barely concealed outrage. “By rogues?”

Marian shrugs delicately, her expression unreadable as ever. “We don’t know,” she says quietly. “But we do know that the vulnerability of our sisters, even within the shifter towns, has not gone unnoticed.”

I look at Callum, expecting him to look as frustrated as I feel, but his expression is carefully schooled, and I have the unmistakable feeling I’m about to be blindsided. Nothing should surprise me where the witches are concerned. But Callum? I don’t want to fall out with my brother, but I will.

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"We've discussed a solution," Callum finally says. "Marian and I have spoken at length about the need for a union between our people. A witch and shifter alliance to build trust and stop these attacks." He looks at me, a silent plea for understanding, as I simply fold my arms and glare at him.

"You've spoken?" I snap, anger clouding my judgment. "Without consulting me? When did this happen?"

Marian clears her throat softly, and I turn to glare at her. Her face is carefully neutral, but a glint in her eyes tells me she already knows she's won this round. I take a deep breath, trying to calm the storm within me. This isn't helping anyone. My pack, our sanctuary, our safety—it's all being threatened by politics and lies. And here we are, arguing about who gets to decide what happens next.

"Don't fret, Alpha," she chides lightly. "If you hadn't arrived late, you'd probably have been involved in our little chat. Poor Aiden was too busy playing host, so he missed it, too."

"I—" Aiden begins, his fury evident, but Callum cuts him off.

"Marian," he growls in warning. "We're not playing games. If you genuinely want a union, stop pissing everyone off."

The high priestess seems to consider her position for a moment before brushing it off with a wave of her hand, a small action that still dazzles with magic from her fingertips.

“Fair enough,” she laughs. “Wolves are so easy to piss off, though. It’s rather your default.”

I roll my eyes, and as I do, I turn toward the crowd and instantly find Emily again. She looks about as happy as I feel, and I can’t help wondering what about all this has her riled up. She’s a witch; they live for this chaos and drama.

Callum takes a deep breath before turning to Aiden and me. I feel my wolf bristle, but force myself to remain calm and hear him out. “Don’t think for a second I agree with everything Marian suggests,” he starts. “Or her take on the integration of witches. There has been a lot of progress there, even if she doesn’t want to admit it. But there is also lingering tension. I agree a union would help. It is our way, and it’s worked for millennia; I don’t see why it won’t help here.”

I scoff, “Have you heard yourself? Can you even imagine what Ralph would say about this stupid plan?” I snap.

Aiden laughs. “All the more reason to do it, though, right?”

I turn and glare at Aiden, all thoughts of his growth as an alpha evaporating when I consider that he’s so led by his dick that he’d support the union just to bed more witches. I shake my head at him, not even bothering to reply.

Marian sighs dramatically. “I know that some of you,” she begins, staring at me pointedly, “cannot look past your prejudice. So to make it easier on your small, closed minds, we’re offering a very palatable choice. One of our sisters comes from an illustrious line in our coven and is blessed with excellent magical knowledge, but no practical magic of her own...so as not to scare the wolves.”

Marian continues talking, but the blood begins to race in my ears, and a sinking realization begins to dawn.

“Emily,” Marian calls out, “will you step forward, dear?”

Emily freezes, her gaze snapping to mine as the crowd parts slightly. I feel like someone has punched me in the gut as she takes slow steps forward, clad in a dark blue dress that clings to her curves and makes my mouth water. Even Ava looks shocked, and I look at Callum, his expression telling me instantly that he didn’t know Marian was going to choose Emily, though it makes sense in some ways—she’s been traveling between the packs, helping with the rune placement. Her specialty, apparently, though I assumed that was bewitching spells.

Time seems to stand still until Marian claps her hands. “So, any takers? Betas or alphas only, please, don’t insult the witches any more than you already have.”

I look at Marian, exasperated. I quite often think the high priestess is insane. Now I’m sure of it. She claims to love all hersisters, yet she’s practically throwing Emily away with glee. Something doesn’t add up, and I can barely think straight.

“This isn’t a damn auction, Marian,” Callum snaps.

My wolf is going crazy, growling and snapping, ready to rip Marian’s head off. The thought of Emily bewitching another wolf the way she did me in the forest is filling my veins with rage.

Aiden nods, his face serious. “Quite. The plan is solid. Let’s adjourn and discuss who will be considered properly. We each have several betas who wo—”

“I’ll do it,” I grind out, loud and clear.

The clearing falls silent except for one very feminine voice from the crowd.

“The hell you will,” Emily states, walking away with her head held high.

Chapter 2 - Emily

The crowd suddenly seems endless as I wade my way through it. Even though I know there are fewer than a hundred people here, it feels like thousands. Their stares feel like a thousand pinpricks attacking my skin as I push through toward the trucks and a couple of pop-up tents, hoping to find some peace away from the awe and drama so I can think clearly.

I'm dimly aware of someone following me, and I hope it's not Tristen or Marian—I don't even want to look at either of them right now.

Should I be surprised that Marian would throw me under the bus like this? Probably not. Like most witches, she values magic above all else. Her close personal ties to my mother before she died and my knowledge of the runes keep me somewhat in her favor, but it's never been enough to shield me from her overall disappointment completely. She probably thinks I'm finally living up to my potential by helping the coven.

By becoming a mate to a shifter.

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I know the wolves make these types of alliances. Hell, even witches love an alliance, but it's usually not one made by marriage. I'm not a shifter. I'm a witch, and my coven is supposed to protect me, not give me away like trash.

And to him of all people. Of all men.

If Marian's announcement had shocked me to my core, Tristen's outburst had floored me, sucked the oxygen from my lungs and crushed my ability to think rationally. My emotions teeter between pure rage and a swelling of devastation. That Marian would discard me so casually, and that Tristen would seize the opportunity to what? Humiliate me? Punish me? Degrade me?

I finally find some shade under the pop-up tent and release the breath of frustration I've been holding for too long. I hear a rustling behind me and turn, relieved to see it's Ava and Sarah.

"Are you okay?" Ava says, pulling me into a hug I didn't even know I needed. "That was...unexpected."

Sarah and I scoff simultaneously. "They really didn't tell you before?" she asks, incredulous.

I shake my head. "No," I reply, stepping back and running a hand through my hair, "but that probably shouldn't surprise me."

"At least Tristen stepped up," Ava says, and Sarah nods, clearly attempting to help. "I know he's a bit grumpy, but he—"

“He hates witches,” I state plainly. The women look at each other and wince. It’s not their fault; they don’t know about my brief history with Tristen, but they do know he hates witches.

“Well,” Sarah hedges, “perhaps he’s had a change of heart, if he wants to help the alliance.”

Before I can reply, I sense Marian’s powerful aura approaching.

“We all must do what’s best for the coven,” Marian says, her bright white hair shining in the sunlight. Although ethereally beautiful, she fixes me with a hard stare. “You should be honored.”

I want to tell her where to shove her ‘honor,’ but I don’t. I’ve always wanted my coven’s approval; I’ve never gone against them, always trying to make myself useful. Can I really say no now?

I look out beyond Marian. The crowd is pretending not to stare, but on the stage, Tristen is engaged in some kind of tense debate with his brothers, and their attention is obviously torn between watching to see if I will reappear and the drama occurring on stage.

As I watch the scene before me, Tristen glances my way, almost as though he senses my gaze. Our eyes meet, and the scowl on his face doesn’t bode well. Something else flickers in his eyes.

Pure determination.

I turn back to Marian. “I need some time,” I whisper.

“Time is something you don’t have,” she replies. “The ceremony will commence

now. Malik's forces grow stronger, and our weak link with the shifters will be our downfall. An alliance with Tristen, who harbors the biggest resentments, will help your coven the most. I knew he'd step forward."

At that, my eyes flick to hers, holding her steely emerald gaze longer than I ever have before. "How did you know?"

She briefly looks to Ava and Sarah before shrugging. "I knew. He has the most work to do, after all."

I never told a soul about my encounter with Tristen in the forest, so she couldn't possibly know about our history. Could she? Not that it matters; her concern about how little the shifters prioritize our safety in comparison to their fellow wolves is sincere, and it's causing rightful resentment within our covens. If our kind stops working together, Malik will only be stronger for it.

I look to Ava and Sarah, both of whom look nervous around Marian. Most people are. But Ava lifts her head to give me a reassuring smile.

"You're our friend, Emily," she says. "We'll be here for you, whatever you decide."

Her words touch me more than she'll probably ever know. I've only known Ava and Sarah for a few short months since Malik attacked, kidnapping Ava's beautiful daughter Harper. I've had the chance to get to know them, working on the runes, and it's only by making friends outside the coven that I've come to really understand how lonely I'd been.

I glance back over at the stage but can no longer see Tristen. Perhaps he's changed his mind, anyway. The thought both excites and terrifies me at the same time. Taking a breath, I try to calm my nervous system, which I've worked on since I was young, reminding myself that I can do hard things.

“Okay,” I say quietly. “But I won’t let him treat me badly. I won’t be some submissive fake luna who is scared of all the shifters.”

Marian smirks, a low cackle escaping as she replies, “Child, you are still a witch at heart. I think it’s you who needs to remember that.”

I smile weakly at Ava, who is still holding my arm.

“We would never let him treat you badly, anyway,” she soothes. “Besides, I honestly don’t think he’s like that.”

Sighing, I nod. She means well, but I definitely don’t have the emotional bandwidth to explain myself more right now. The only way through this is going to be to push those feelings down again, pretend that Tristen means nothing, and put the coven first.

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I let Marian lead me back to the stage, my heart pounding so hard in my chest that I'm sure everyone can hear it. The crowd naturally seems to part for Marian, and we reach the stage far quicker than I was able to retreat from it. I linger back with Ava and Sarah, deliberately avoiding eye contact with anyone else. Marian heads over to talk to Callum and Aiden, but I still can't see Tristen. Seconds seem to turn to minutes, and then the waiting just becomes painful. My skin feels like it's being flayed under the scrutiny of the crowd.

After what feels like forever, Marian claps her hands, causing a hush to descend over the clearing. "It is decided," she declares. "The ceremony will begin."

My legs feel numb as I take the steps with Ava, who then goes to stand by Callum's side. I don't miss the look of apprehension that lingers behind her encouraging smile, but I don't have long to wonder what she's thinking before my heart almost gives out as Tristen climbs back onto the stage. I'd be sorely mistaken if I were hoping for any kind of encouragement from him. His expression is thunderous.

I take a deep breath as he approaches, forcing myself to lock eyes with him. He's just as imposing as ever. It's hard to look away. His golden eyes glint in the moonlight, muscles tensing beneath his shirt. All I feel is the onslaught of memories as he towers over me. His rejection still stings as much as it did that night. It shouldn't. It was such a brief encounter, but it still weighs me down, no matter how much I try to overcome it.

He stops directly in front of me, and Marian stands with their healer next to us. They instruct him to take my hand, and he does, but there's no warmth in his touch. Despite that, I still feel the flicker of what was between us. I think he feels it, too, because his

eyes suddenly snap to mine, almost causing me to stumble back. But it's not reverence or desire in his eyes now. It's pure malice.

The bond ritual begins awkwardly, his fingers barely brushing mine as he traces the pattern on my skin with cool fingertips. It feels like he's going through the motions instead of bonding us together, and I can't help but shiver under the harshwind that whips through the clearing. The trees creak as if they are just as unsettled by this union. Tristen doesn't even meet my gaze. Instead, his focus is entirely on the process.

I try to concentrate on what I know about the ceremony from watching others over the years. There's supposed to be a kiss at some point—a symbolic joining of mates for all to see—but there's nothing about this that is normal. This isn't how it should be.

Finally, the moment comes when he traces the last mark and leans in close to my ear. His warm breath sends shivers down my spine as he whispers, "You're mine now, aren't you?"

It's not a promise or a claim of love; it feels more like a threat. It makes me want to run away, but there's nowhere to go—not with the eyes of the entire crowd fixed on us.

He pulls back abruptly, breaking the contact between us before stepping away without even bothering to look at me. My heart feels like it's been ripped from my chest as I watch him casually walk back to his brothers. The new bond between us sizzles with tension, but that's the only thing connecting us. I can feel a cold chasm growing between us, separating us further with every passing second.

I try to push past my fears as Marian announces, "The mating ceremony is complete." The crowd murmurs with anticipation. As far as spectacles go, I'm sure a lackluster

ceremony between a witch and an alpha will be remembered for a long time to come.

I keep my head high as Ava approaches to give me another hug, whispering in my ear, “Whatever his problem is, let me know if you need Callum’s or my help. It will be okay.”

I refuse to let Tristen see that I’m affected by any of this, so I keep my head held high as I return her embrace. “I will be fine,” I tell her, my voice far stronger than I feel.

Various groups break away from the crowd, and discussions and plans are made for both defense and offense, where Malik is concerned. I feel almost cut adrift, left on the stage as everyone talks around me. The sun seems to have disappeared behind the clouds suddenly, and a cold wind whips around me.

I look around just as Tristen strides toward me, his expression unreadable. “I’ve been told to take you back to the pack. My beta will stay for the rest,” he says. “Your sisters will send your things later. Come on.”

Without waiting for a response, he walks off, and I’m left to trail after him toward his truck. Thank goodness Aiden held the council meeting close to Tristen’s border, because the drive is excruciating and would have been so much worse had it gone on any longer.

We drive through the town. I’ve been here before, but never thought I’d one day have to live here. It’s cute. It’s a small mountain town with a main square that has some benches and lawns, and a large general store, cafe, and bakery. Tristen doesn’t seem to notice or care about our surroundings or me as he drives in complete silence, his jaw set as he stares straight ahead.

The alpha house is set just off the main square; I’ve only seen it from a distance before, as I made a point of avoiding being anywhere near Tristen on the few

occasions I had to come here. The cabin is admittedly beautiful, a perfect blend of modern and traditional, with a wooden exterior that has been stained a deep brown to match the tree line, and steel-framed windows that reflect the sun.

Inside, it's just as impressive. The floors are made from dark wood, the walls are painted neutral off-white, and the minimal Scandinavian decor gives it an airy feel. I notice straight away there are no personal items anywhere; it feels like I've stepped into a magazine spread rather than a single man's house.

After a half-hearted, brief tour, Tristen points down one of the halls. "That's my room and office down there," he tells me, leading me in the opposite direction and pushing open a door.

"And this is where you'll be staying," he says as I walk into the sparsely furnished room.

Under normal circumstances, I'd think the room felt quite calming, almost like a hotel room, with a queen-sized bed, a nightstand with a single lamp on it, and a small dresser in the corner. A large window looks out over the wilderness beyond the pack lands—the view is beautiful, but also isolating. Just like Tristen himself, really.

I sit down on the edge of the bed and take a deep breath to steady myself. This is my new life now—a life I never wanted or asked for.

Tristen hovers by the door for a moment before letting out a breath. "I'm going for a run," he finally says. "Don't touch anything you don't have to. No spells. I have cameras."

I shouldn't be stunned by his words, but I am. I'm not sure he cares, though, because he simply shuts the door on me. I listen to his footsteps receding down the hall before I finally allow myself to break down. Away from Marian and my coven's

disapproval, away from Tristen and his coldness, I allow myself to take a moment and let out all the emotion that threatens to drown me. And then I'll put it all back in the box I keep locked away in my mind, and I'll prove to Tristen and everyone else that nothing and no one can hurt me.

Chapter 3 - Tristen

"So, dare I ask?" Ryan begins. "How're things going with your new mate?"

I know he's just trying to get a reaction from me; he's asked me the same question almost every day for two weeks now.

"She seems fine to me," I reply, deliberately keeping my voice neutral, not to give him the satisfaction of knowing how much all this is driving me crazy. "I haven't seen her much, but she's worked with the witches on some of their demands, and I've okayed a couple of new initiatives. The union appears to have quelled the dissent."

Ryan chuckles, "Well, it's a good thing they didn't down tools...or, rather, runes," he says, looking out over the section of forest where we discovered a rogue base. We're out here fortifying the area with a new batch of the runes. "You must be keeping her happy."

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I growl; it's low, but Ryan steps back. "Drop it. I'm in no mood. I'm heading back for the visitors from the mainland," I snap, and walk away, leaving Ryan to finish up with the other betas.

I love Ryan, almost like a brother, but if I have to answer one more question involving Emily, I'm going to rip someone's throat out. It's bad enough I've had Callum on the phone more times in the last two weeks than in the previous two years, clearly at the request of his mate Ava, looking for reassurance about Emily. It's starting to piss me off that they think I can't handle this situation without some kind of group effort. Callum's backed off a bit, but I know Ava will have him coming backaround—if I didn't love my new sister-in-law so much, we'd have a problem.

The truth is, I haven't seen much of Emily. But that is deliberate, because every time I do, it's clear whatever she did to bewitch me before is still strong. And I refuse to give her the satisfaction of seeing how she affects me. Claiming her on nothing but impulse was bad enough—I just couldn't handle the thought of another male touching her.

That's the same recurring thought that has plagued me for the last two years; her writhing beneath another man, clinging to him the way she did to me, as he fucks her. I know how promiscuous witches are—even more so than shifters, if Aiden's experiences bedding every witch he comes across are anything to go by. If I'd sensed Aiden had been with her, I'd...

I grip the steering wheel, trying to fight the red mist that threatens to descend at the mere thought.

I need to get a grip on myself before this meeting with Nolan, the alpha from a mainland pack we trade with. We're on reasonably friendly terms—or rather, as friendly as differing packs generally get—and I've met him a few times, but we mostly communicate via email. However, it appears they've been having problems with rogues using their ports to come to the island. He's been hearing a lot of talk about Malik and wants to sit down to discuss it.

After weeks of little progress, I'm ready to entertain a rare outsider's perspective, hoping to glean something of use for our fight against Malik and his rogues. Nolan will be arriving in an hour or so, and we're hosting him and his betas for a pack lunch. On the surface, it's all about trade, but underneath, I sense this is as important to Nolan as it is to us. The local witches will be there to discuss potential protection for their ports, which means Emily will be there.

Living under the same roof is near torture, but I manage to avoid her where possible. Early morning and late night patrols with the border guard, pack meetings held at the hall instead of my home office, and generally taking every excuse to stay busy rather than deal with the witch currently occupying my house. Because when I do have to face her, I'm either completely thrown by her mesmerizing beauty or filled with rage because her presence is a constant reminder of how weak I am. My wolf is of no use; he's constantly pushing me toward her. He's more than happy to take her as his mate. He's driven by a mixture of desire and the mating ceremony, and is probably still bewitched. He'd be happy to take her in all ways—but I know better, and I'm not falling for it. Not again.

I pull up the drive and sit for a moment, watching the house. It seems quiet, and I can't help but hope Emily has already left. I need to change and get my head right before this meeting without her presence distracting me. It's not lost on me that I shouldn't be hiding from my own mate, especially a witch, when I'm an alpha. But at least I know what I'm dealing with.

I head into the house, noticing immediately that the security system is still inactive, which means...

“Oh, you’re here,” Emily states, freezing by the kitchen island as soon as I walk in. She looks strangely at home in my space, the warmth of the sunlight filtering through the tall windows and highlighting her long red hair.

“Well, it is my house,” I snap, tearing my eyes away from her before they linger too long on her beautiful face, with her pale skin, perfect pink lips, and her curvy figure clad in her long dark blue dress that dips provocatively between her breasts.

Her scent hits me, and I close my eyes for a moment, trying to focus on anything but how it makes me want to sink into her. My wolf practically claws to the surface, and desire coils in my stomach. I grit my teeth as I try to push him back down.

"I'm going to change," I say gruffly, heading upstairs. I walk away, hoping she will just let me go, but I sense her following me immediately and spin around.

For just a second, I think I see some vulnerability in her features, but it’s gone before I can be sure, replaced by her usual nonchalance. “Should I wait for you?” she asks. “To go to the meeting together?”

“Why?” I snap before I can think. She just looks so damn beautiful, and I want to get away from her before I do something I might regret.

“Because I’m your luna, and—” she begins quietly, but I cut her off.

“Everyone knows that’s a sham, so I really don’t give a damn what you do,” I say, storming away from her before she can say anything else that might crack my resolve. Does she want to be luna? Does she think she’ll get more power over me that way?

From my room, I hear the front door open and then close. Good. I need my head in the game for this meeting, so I don't get distracted by her sorcery.

I move quickly, changing into my jeans and a black T-shirt, before heading downstairs again.

I can feel her presence hanging heavy in the air around me despite her absence. It's practically tangible as it seems to brush against my skin. She's always with me, despite the distance I try to put between us, and that just makes me want to explode. But I can't ever let her see it.

I walk toward the pack hall and see Ryan and Kris waiting for me outside. They nod at me as I approach, acknowledging my alpha status for this meeting with another pack as they fall into line behind me. We head into the hall together, the scent of anticipation and excitement filling the air as we prepare for this important meeting with Nolan's team.

Once inside, I immediately see Emily laughing with some shifters, including Nolan, who is watching her like she's the most beautiful thing he's ever seen. Fury boils up inside me at how effortlessly she seems to use her magic on these fools, while all I can do is struggle against my own damn wolf's desires.

I clear my throat loudly as I approach, making sure everyone's attention is on me.

"Welcome," I greet Nolan, a little more abruptly than I intended. "Let's get started, shall we?"

Nolan shakes my hand and smiles broadly, flashing his canines. He's relaxed—or at least he's determined to project an air of calm befitting an alpha. I realize he has no idea who Emily is or her ability to bewitch. He's just another victim of her fake charms, and I shouldn't let her affect these talks.

I nod, turning toward her. “Do you mind, Emily?” I say, dismissing her.

She chuckles breezily and puts her hand—actually puts her hand—on Nolan’s arm and says, “Of course, we can catch up later,” before walking away with a sway of her hips that neither of us misses.

The wave of desire that hits me nearly sends me reeling and is only matched by my deep sense of irritation. I take my seat at the head of the table opposite Nolan, trying to ignore the way Emily’s scent fills the room and the way her laughter still rings in my ears. The meeting begins, but all I can think about is getting away from here and finding some peace from this constant torment.

As we discuss business matters and potential alliances, I catch glimpses of Emily out of the corner of my eye, her eyes flickering towards me occasionally before flitting away again. It’s infuriating how she seems so carefree and unaffected when I all feel is this constant longing with my wolf permanently on edge.

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Nolan is clearly a self-assured alpha who comes from a dynasty of alphas going back generations. But even he is rattled by the rogues amassing on his coastline, all drawn to Malik's cult-like rule. "How has this escalated so fast?" he muses. "There was no word of this, Malik, and then all of a sudden, he's everywhere. When we tried to run the rogues out of town, he attacked our ships. Some kind of shapeshifting dragon."

I raise my brows. That is new information. "I didn't realize your ships had been attacked," I tell him. "The witches have runes that would help. It benefits all of us to maintain trade."

At the mention of the witches, Nolan's dark eyes dart immediately to Emily, a tiny action that raises my hackles. "I'd be interested in talking to your witches," he says casually, "about the runes. Would Emily be available for a trip to the mainland?"

"No," I reply smoothly, leaning back in my chair. "Emily will never be available for that."

Something that looks a lot like amusement dances in his eyes. "Oh, I apologize, I didn't realize you two were—"

"We have made a strategic alliance with the witches," I tell him. "I have made an alliance with Emily in particular, but that is all."

He chuckles, "And this means Emily is unavailable?"

I nod, willing him to drop it before I drop him. "That is right. However, if you're less concerned about which witch helps you, we can still protect your ships."

He laughs a full belly laugh that draws attention from around the room. “You’re right, of course,” he says. “But you can’t blame me for wanting to mix business with pleasure.”

My jaw tightens, but I school my features into a polite smile. “Of course not,” I reply, trying to ignore the biting undertone of his words.

The meeting winds down, and I’m left feeling like it’s been more of a success than I envisioned. With the new information about Malik’s reach, an alliance feels tentative but promising. If it comes to it, a friendly pack on the mainland may be of consequence, especially if we can stop more rogues from joining Malik’s forces. Nolan excuses himself to take a call, and I pointedly head in the opposite direction of Emily to grab a drink and send an update to Callum and Aiden regarding the meeting.

I’m just putting my phone away as I spot Nolan heading back in and making a beeline for Emily. You have got to be kidding me. Surely, no alpha would be so foolish.

But I soon realize it’s Emily doing the flirting. She’s touching his arm, her eyes still flickering towards me occasionally before moving away again, a smirk tugging at her soft pink lips. If she’s trying to wind me up, it’s working.

I consider trying to walk away, but my feet remain fixed in place, and a strange mixture of anger and jealousy burns hot in my chest.

Suddenly, Nolan’s eyes meet mine, and amusement flashes across his face. Before I can stop myself, I storm across the room towards them.

"Excuse me," I say, my voice low, dangerous, and completely focused on Emily. "I think you've had enough company for one night."

She laughs lightly. “Don’t be silly, Tristen. I’m simply entertaining our guests.” She

smiles, an unmistakable glint in her eyes. “Besides, someone needs to talk about the runes, and I am the expert.”

“She has been very informative,” Nolan says. “Beauty and brains.”

She laughs again, and it sounds bloody musical. Deep down, I know what she’s doing, but I’m past caring. When she reaches out to touch his arm again, her eyes go to mine, and I know it’s a challenge, but I can’t stop myself. My hand moves like lightning, snatching hers away. The room falls silent as all eyes turn to us. I glance at Nolan to see if he’s going to react, but his expression is carefully schooled.

“My beta, Ryan, will see you to your ship,” I say firmly, not releasing my grip on Emily’s arm. “I need to have a conversation with my mate.”

Nolan nods, that damned smug amusement still dancing behind his otherwise neutral face. With that, I walk out of the hall with Emily, pointedly ignoring everyone in the room. Once outside, I spin around to face her. I’m not sure what I expected, but the look of defiance on her face almost takes my breath away. It takes everything in me not to kiss her then and there; she’s intoxicating.

“We have a deal,” I snarl. “You are my mate. What the fuck was that?”

She smiles, and it only makes her look even more radiant. “You said you didn’t give a damn what I do, so I thought you wouldn’t mind if I had some fun,” she pouts.

And just like that, I’m reminded of what kind of fun witches like to have. Bewitching and fucking anyone who might be useful. The thought makes my blood boil in my veins as I step closer to her, leaning down to whisper in her ear, “You can’t be a whore and my luna. Get back to the fucking house.”

When I step back, I notice her mask of defiance slip slightly, but whatever emotion

lies underneath is just as unreadable. Without a word, she ducks around me and walks off toward the house without even glancing backward. Anger still hums throughout my body, showing no signs of dissipating. Not trusting myself to go home, once I see her disappear into the house, I turn toward the forest, shifting as I break into a run. I'll need to run for hours to burn off this heady mix of rage and pure desire that is coursing through my veins.

Chapter 4 - Emily

Lying in my bed, I stretch out and turn my head toward the large picture window. I can see why he picked this plot. The views are incredible. The forest spills all the way down the mountain right to the edge of town, where the house sits, but in the distance, I can catch a glimpse of the ocean through breaks in the foliage.

It really is perfect.

And if I close my eyes and take a deep breath, I can almost forget that Tristen called me a whore. Almost.

I replay the memory from the other night in my head. His look of pure disgust and rage seems more vivid each time I recall it. A small bubble of laughter almost escapes my lips, but it's humorless. The whole thing feels deeply ironic, as the only man I've ever even kissed is the one calling me a whore.

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Perhaps he thinks kissing men in the forest is normal for me. There was nothing normal about that night—our reaction to each other was something else. Primal, even. I shudder at the memory, willing it to go away, pushing it back down along with all the others that could only ever hurt me.

I refuse to be hurt; I promised myself I was going to take control of my situation, and that's what I'm doing. The coven is happy with the changes I helped implement, and next week, I'm starting a drop-in session for witches who are nervous about mixing with the shifters, hoping to integrate them better. Ava and Sarah gave me some great advice on how they've been helping women fleeing domestic violence to rebuild their lives, and a lot of the initiatives seem like they'd work well, integrating the covens, too.

So, I'm too busy to be bothered by Tristen's words. Or the fact that he can't stand being in the same room as me. Or the way his obvious and public rejection of me means that the pack either stares at me with pity or mistrust.

I was flirting with Nolan, or at least attempting to. But only because he was nice to me, and damn if it wasn't a welcome change. He made me laugh and actually wanted to talk to me.

For a moment, I was actuallyalmostenjoying myself. It didn't hurt that Nolan was so attractive. With his tousled brown hair, amber eyes, and strong features, I know he looks a lot like Tristen, a thought that pisses me off even as I acknowledge it.

Frustrated at my situation and the shifter that dominates my thoughts, I swing my legs out of bed. I'm due at the mandated training session in an hour—self-defense classes

for witches that we hope will help them defend themselves better against the rogues if it comes to it. I've yet to be convinced that a few self-defense moves would help more than our magic, but it's better than nothing for witches with a lesser degree of practical magic. Or no magic at all.

I walk through the house toward the kitchen, not even bothering to put anything on over my skimpy shorts and tank set—I know he won't be here. He never is. The house is so beautiful, and having it all to myself should be a bonus, but it's torture feeling him everywhere, yet knowing he hates me. I'm not completely naive, though; his reaction to my flirting with Nolan contained an element of jealousy. It's probably just because it made him look bad as an alpha to have his luna looking at other men. And as twisted as it sounds, for a moment, I thought he was going to kiss me.

I put a fresh pot on and stand by the window, frozen in place, when I see Tristen at the end of the drive talking to a couple of his betas. He must only just now be leaving. I vaguely recognize the two men with him, but I can't place their names. They both have gym bags with them, so they're probably heading to the training. As I pour my coffee and take a long sip, letting the caffeine flood my system, a thought formulates.

If he's going to make my life hell, I can do the same. Misery loves company, after all.

Walking into the hall forty minutes later, I make a point of ignoring Tristen and walk over to where a small mix of witches, both from my coven and others, are warming up with the betas I saw earlier. I greet the other women and make a point of removing my sweater slowly to reveal the cropped tank I chose to pair with my yoga pants. Normally, I'd keep the sweater firmly on, but the fact that I can feel Tristen already looking makes it instantly worthwhile.

"Right, ladies, Emily," one of the betas says, stepping forward and deliberately addressing me as luna. "I'm Sam. We're going to start with some stretches before moving onto some defensive moves."

“Okay, Sam,” I smile. “Are you going to be throwing us around? You look pretty strong.”

Some of the younger women giggle, and Sam blushes. “I, er, only to show you the moves.”

I laugh lightly, “Oh, don’t worry, we don’t mind at all. Do we?” I say, turning to the witches, who are all already swooning over the shifters and need no encouragement.

Tristen made an error. None of my sisters are whores—but witches are in touch with their sensuality. They enjoy their bodies and are connected to Mother Nature and the goddess in a unique way. They’re also hopeless romantics. The ironic part is that I also used to be a hopeless romantic, waiting for my prince charming—but Tristen destroyed that part of me in the forest that night, and I’ve felt nothing for another man since.

That doesn’t mean I can’t act the part, though.

As the session continues, I make sure to brush up against Sam, deliberately taking the time to note the hard muscles under his shirt and catching him off guard with quick moves that showcase my flexibility and the tight outfit I’m wearing. Sam seems nice, and if I actually cared, I’d probably be getting a thrill from this as he’s clearly not unaffected, though I’m trying very hard not to look it. I don’t feel sorry for him, though, because, judging by the reaction of the other witches, he’s going to be very popular, anyway.

We break to grab some water, and I walk over to where we left our bottles with one of the friendly witches from my cover, Savannah. She lets out a low whistle and smirks at me. “I see what you’re doing, Em,” she laughs. “Playing with fire, aren’t we?”

I take a long drink of my water, gathering my thoughts before replying. “I’m not doing anything wrong,” I shrug. “Just living a little.”

The willowy blonde witch chuckles. “This is a different side to you, I must say. That hulking alpha must be doing you some good. Not sure I’d make the wolf too jealous, though, he looks like he’s about to destroy Sam, and I have plans for him.”

I glance around, and sure enough, Tristen is openly glaring at Sam, who looks concerned enough to keep his distance from me and Tristen now. I sigh. He seems nice, and I genuinely don’t want him to get into trouble, especially if Savannah wants him in one piece. I decide to change tacks, and when we restart, I move to the other side of the group to work with another beta, Garret’s, group. Savannah gives me a wink as she moves in on a visibly relieved Sam.

Garret appears to be oblivious to the previous tension, and his group is lively with some witches I don’t know. I introduce myself, and it probably just looks as though I’m making the rounds as luna to get to know everyone. I continue my routine of ensuring Tristen has an excellent view every time I stretch in my tight yoga pants or have to ask Garret to show me a move again, making sure to point out how strong he is. Tristen has been overseeing the training and moving between groups, but is clearly making a point to avoid mine. I notice he’s standing with Ryan off to the side now, visibly raging about something, and I get a little thrill, hoping my attempts to make him jealous have worked.

Deep down, I know it’s foolish. I know I shouldn’t care. But he’s been ignoring me since I got here. The only time he cared about my presence at all was when Nolan was interested. Part of me wants to see if that was a one-off or if I can get a reaction out of him again.

As the morning wears on, I find myself looking around for Tristen more than I’d like to admit. When he finally joins our group, his eyes are hard, and his jaw is clenched.

If I didn't know better, I'd say he was angry.

I'm surprised when he comes to stand directly beside me, leaning in to whisper, "What's going on, Emily?" His voice is so low that only I can hear.

My heart skips a beat at the sound of my name in his deep, rumbling tone. "Nothing," I reply quickly, trying not to show any reaction. "Just getting to know everyone."

He scoffs softly. "I can see that."

I turn to glance at him and don't miss how his eyes are fixed directly on mine before looking down, scanning my body without even trying to hide it. I can feel my cheeks turning red, and I hate how he can still affect me so much. He walks off, and I feel my resolve faltering in his wake. Straightening my shoulders, I realize that several people have stopped to watch our interaction, and my embarrassment increases.

Having always been the outsider in my coven, deemed so unimportant, Marian just bartered me away like I'm nothing to them, the thought that everyone can see that Tristen has rejected me physically stings more than I want to admit. I guess that's why Nolan's attention felt so good.

For the rest of the session, I double down on my flirting. Garret is good-looking and clearly a bit of a player, because although he's wary, it's clear that he's a natural flirt and can't help himself. He's careful not to overstep, but I find it easy to laugh at his jokes, and I know I'm monopolizing his time in the group with our increasingly playful joking around. Every time I look at Tristen, I see his face darkening further; instead of putting me off, it spurs me on.

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After asking Garret to help me demonstrate one of the moves to the group and enjoying having his large hands grasp my waist, I pause and glance at where Tristen had been standing, but notice he's gone. As Garret helps the others with the move, I look around the hall, not seeing Tristen anywhere.

"You're doing great," Garret says, startling me. "I'm impressed. Want to go again?"

"Thanks," I mumble, realizing my victory feels hollow now that Tristen isn't even around to see it. "I'm actually just going to make a quick call," I say, grabbing my towel and heading for the door.

Outside, I check to make sure no one is around before closing the door behind me and leaning against the side of the building. The sun beats down on my face, worn from the class and the weight of my own emotions. I close my eyes and lean my head back. I stand like that, listening to the sound of the birds and my own erratic breathing for a few minutes, until something blocks the sun's rays. I begin to open my eyes, but a shadowy figure clamps a large hand across my mouth.

"So much for your self-defense skills," a voice I instantly recognize as Tristen's mocks as I push him away.

He steps back, but only by a fraction, and I glare up at him, trying to ignore how having him this close makes me feel. After trying to calm my nervous system, it's now racing out of control. "That's not fair, Tristen," I snap.

He leans forward and plants his hand firmly on the wall beside me, his arm muscles flexing next to me, but I'm determined not to be caught looking, however much I find

them distracting. Being a shifter, I know he'll be able to sense my heart rate picking up, and I'm hoping he thinks it's because I'm annoyed, not because his proximity is affecting me so much.

"Oh, it's not fair, is it?" he replies, his voice neutral, but the fire in his amber eyes is anything but. "Do you think it's fair that I've just watched my luna flaunt herself for all my betas? How do you think that makes me look?"

Knowing this was exactly what I wanted, I'm not sure why I don't feel more triumphant. But I still lift my chin, meeting his fiery gaze with one of my own as I reply, "Foolish. Which seems about right."

We stare at each other for a moment until I can't take it anymore and look away. I wait for him to back up, but he doesn't. Instead, his warm breath fans my face as he whispers, "You're playing with fire, little witch. Don't forget, I bite."

My heart leaps into my throat as I feel the heat of his breath on my neck and the gentle brush of his lips against my earlobe. A shiver runs down my spine, but I try to ignore it, not wanting to give him the satisfaction. He moves closer, and I can feel the hard wall behind me, forcing me to stay still. He traces a finger down my jawline, and I close my eyes tightly, trying to focus on anything but how his touch is making me tremble. Suddenly, it feels like we're right back there in the forest two years ago.

"Tristen," I breathe, trying to sound bored but knowing it doesn't come out that way.

His hand gently cups the side of my face and tilts it up so our eyes meet again. His other hand slides into my hair and tugs gently, forcing me to tilt my head back further. I whimper softly as his mouth hovers over mine for what feels like an eternity before he jerks back and pulls away suddenly.

"I'm not falling for your games again, witch," he growls lowly between clenched

teeth before turning and walking away.

I silently curse the tears gathering in my eyes, and not for the first time, I'm left wondering why he thinks any of this is my fault.

Chapter 5 - Tristen

My muscles burn as I complete the final set. Ryan, who has already tapped out, sits on the bench opposite, waiting for me to finish. I know he wants to talk to me, but that's the last thing I'm going to do. Nothing he can say is going to help my mood right now.

I've been avoiding talking about anything to do with Emily, my mood, or how I punched Garret in the face the moment I had him alone.

Garret's always been a sucker for a pretty face; he's also a terrible flirt who would never actually mean to piss off his alpha. But the fact is, he did piss off his alpha, and I think I may well have exploded if I didn't punch him. I did what I had to do; he apologized for the disrespect, and I just want to move on. I like Garret, and I sure as hell don't want to be fighting over that witch.

Except that's exactly what I did, and the whole damn thing is pissing me off.

I've had a headache for days about it, and I know Ryan, as my second in command, is working up to dealing with it. But I really wish he wouldn't. My wolf feels primed and ready to take on anyone who even so much as breathes Emily's name near me.

It's bad enough that I am living and breathing her intoxicating scent at home, having to avoid the whole building for anything other than sleep. I don't need anyone else's input on it.

What am I supposed to do? Admit that she bewitched me years ago and that I seem to still be under her influence? An alpha could never admit something like that.

I've already had Callum and Ava in my ear about how sweet and kind Emily is, suggesting I give the union a chance. I literally don't know what to even say to them; they seem blind to the threat witches pose, as if Malik and the rogues weren't enough to deal with.

Hating her would be so much easier if I didn't feel so drawn to her. It's not just her beauty, though it's hard to miss her incredible green eyes, or the way her unique red hair falls down her back in soft curls that make my hands itch to run my hands through it, or how her smile melts everyone around her. It's also her natural warmth, her laughter when I overhear her on the phone with Ava, and how she draws everyone to her without seeming to realize it.

More bewitching on her part, possibly, though I've never heard of a witch being able to bewitch multiple people, so I assume this is just her. And that makes it even worse.

Despite her ability to bond so well with others, the only surprise has been how disconnected she is from her coven. I half expected my home to be overrun with witches, and I was already thinking of ways to minimize any intrusions into my life. And yet, although I see they value Emily as a conduit for negotiation, there are no close friendships, coven meetings, or spells in my house. I'm not there much, but my wolf would know.

I find it infuriatingly difficult to know what is real where Emily is concerned. The other day, with her pinned against the wall, I looked into her eyes, and it was like our connection was the purest thing on earth. It took me right back to that night in the forest when I'd never felt so aligned with my wolf, so sure of everything.

To find out she was just a witch playing games...rage bubbles from my core again

just thinking about it, and I slam the weights down, sitting up to grab my towel.

Sensing Ryan's eyes on me again, I turn to him and growl, "Say whatever you're going to say, or stop staring at me."

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His eyes widen, but to his credit, he doesn't flinch. "Well, I was going to ask if you're feeling better, but I guess we both know the answer."

I level him with a stare, debating what to say when I can't even articulate it to myself properly, but he continues before I can say anything. "Is this about the rogues, Malik, or that girl that's got you in knots? Not your brothers, all seems well there, I—"

I scoff before cutting him off, "She doesn't have me in knots."

Ryan chuckles. "Garret's sore head would beg to differ. And I'm sure that alpha, Nolan, would have a different impression, too."

"Matters of principle," I shrug, knowing I'm lying.

"Whatever, big guy," Ryan replies. "Principles matter, but I'm sure Emily would be less inclined to go looking for attention elsewhere if you weren't running around the forest day and night or slogging it out in this smelly gym instead of getting to know your mate."

"You don't know what you're talking about," I tell him, standing.

He sighs. "So, try me. What's going on?" Ryan asks. "You're like a bear with a sore head; she's hot, and everyone likes her. Why won't you give the union a chance? You stepped up for it."

I run a hand through my damp hair in exasperation. I don't want to have this conversation; I don't want to admit how hard my wolf is riding me to take her and the

effort it's taking to keep away. I don't want to admit that she has a hold over me.

"She's a witch, Ryan," I say simply. "I don't trust witches. I stepped up so no one else would have to deal with her—end of. Let's just focus on Malik. The union has stopped the witches from going on strike, so let's not waste precious time. I'm sure they'll let us down eventually."

Ryan lets out a low whistle. "You really don't like them witches, do you?" he says. "Any reason for that?"

"Old Ralph may have been a mean bastard, but I'm yet to see he was wrong about the witches," I tell him. "I've seen it for myself."

"Care to elaborate?" Ryan asks, interest dancing behind his eyes.

"No. I do not," I say, walking away to hit the showers and wash away all thoughts of Emily—a damn cold shower.

Staying out late has become the norm. Emily appears to be something of a night owl, so I have to keep pushing it later and later to avoid bumping into her. I do back-to-back patrols with two different groups, and I'm finally feeling tired as I open the door quietly; the irony of sneaking into my own house to avoid a beautiful woman isn't lost on me.

My entire home smells of her; it's everywhere. It's in the very fabric of the walls, inescapable. I close my eyes, taking a deep breath and trying to ignore the way my wolf reacts to her scent. My wolf thinks she's ours, but he's wrong. He can't tell the difference between her magic and a genuine bond.

I move through the house silently, heading for the kitchen. Everything appears quiet until my sensitive hearing picks up the sound of doors closing and Emily's hushed

voice.

“No, it’s okay, I’m coming,” she whispers, followed by, “he’s not back yet. I’ll head up the trail and meet you there.”

Who the fuck is she meeting at this hour? My wolf is instantly on alert, seething as I consider Ryan’s warning. She may be less inclined to look for attention elsewhere. Is she sneaking out to be with someone else? The thought is immediate, and so is the rage that follows.

Her senses are clearly less than any shifter’s, as I only have to hide in the shadows to disguise myself as she slips from the house. She’s obviously so used to me not being here that she barely even checks her surroundings. I fire off a quick text to the late patrol to track my signal and then allow her the illusion of a moment’s headstart before following her, staying in the shadows and tracking her movements down the street to the head of a trail leading into the forest.

With a sigh, I push my anger down and focus on tracking her. I know this forest like the back of my hand, and her scent is clear enough that I follow it easily. My heart races as I watch her disappear into the darkness, knowing full well what could be waiting for her out there.

The full moon paints everything in a silver glow, glinting off the dew that clings to every leaf and blade of grass. She looks stunning in the moonlight, her pale skin seeming to glow from within. Her alluring scent seems even stronger out here in the open air, and the urge to claim her overwhelms me. I have to fight it back, moving into the tree line and following her from afar.

She disappears around a bend in the trail, and I hesitate only for a moment before continuing. My senses are heightened; I can hear the soft rustle of leaves as she moves, smell her fear even from yards away, and taste the adrenaline in the air as my

wolf growls low in my throat.

As I turn the corner, I see her standing completely still, listening. Her body is tense, with her shoulders back and hands clenched into fists at her sides. She's alone and so vulnerable out on this trail. It's like she learned nothing from being attacked years ago. I've seen her train, and she'd be no match against the rogues.

I hear it long before she does, thanks to my shifter sense—the sound of footsteps approaching. And then my nose detects who she's out here meeting before they even come into view. A witch—an injured girl limps toward her, and Emily instantly relaxes. The witch is shaking with fear, but doesn't run when she sees Emily. They don't appear to know each other, and the witch hangs back slightly, conversing in hushed whispers, their voices barely audible in the night air. I listen intently, my hackles rising even more at the mention of Malik and his rogues.

I stay hidden, watching as Emily seemingly reassures the young witch, helping her to lean against a tree for support. She appears to be trying to talk her into coming back to town, but the girl is resisting for some reason. Behind me on the trail, I hear the sound of the late patrol approaching the area. The young witch appears to hear something, too, and stands, ready to try and run despite her injuries. It occurs to me that Emily may follow her deeper into the forest, which I can't have. The drive to protect her—or control her—feels almost overwhelming.

Decision made, I step out of the shadows. “Emily,” I say, my voice low and threatening, “what the hell is going on?”

The patrol howls in the distance, and the young witch panics, lunging away from Emily and into the trees at a surprising pace, considering her injuries.

“Wait,” Emily cries, turning to follow.

Without hesitation, I summon the power of the wind, focusing on Emily as it gathers power and pushes her back toward me. I grab hold of her, crushing her to my body just as the patrol breaks through the trees. I turn to the night watch leader, McCabe, gesturing in the direction the witch fled. “Track a young witch that way. She’s injured, but watch yourself with her magic; she’s scared and might retaliate.”

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Emily huffs as she struggles in my arms, “ She’s not going to retaliate; she’s just frightened. Don’t you dare hurt her.”

The patrol ignores her and goes after the girl. I ignore her, too, until they’ve gone, and then I spin her around as if she weighs nothing and pin her against the nearest tree to stop her from struggling.

“What the hell were you thinking coming out here? Alone?” I growl, my anger barely contained. “You could have been killed out here.”

She gasps, her chest heaving as she stares up at me in shock. “I had to help her,” she whispers. “She’s a rogue, but far too young to be alone. My coven gave her my number weeks ago when she wouldn’t go with them; this is the first time she called. I was trying to bring her in before Malik got his hands on her.”

I shake my head at her naivety. The disconnect between us is clear. She seems to have no idea of the danger she’s in. “You can’t do this again,” I tell her firmly. “It could have all been a trap. Did you think of that?”

She looks away. “I couldn’t just leave her out here injured,” she says quietly.

“Why didn’t you call me or the patrol?” I demand, my voice harsher than I intend.

She looks back at me, her face hardening. “I don’t trust them,” she says simply.

The implication is clear: she doesn’t trust me, either. The feeling is mutual. But as I look down at her, still holding her firmly by the shoulder, I notice the warmth beneath

my hand where we're touching, seeping into my bones, our bond flourishing under my touch.

It's intoxicating, and it scares me.

Her eyes flicker to my lips, and I can feel the magnetic pull between us. The tension crackles in the air as our gazes lock, and I want nothing more than to kiss her senseless right here and now. Her breaths are coming fast and hard, and I don't think she'd stop me.

"Why do you make me feel this way?" I whisper into the darkness.

She looks up at me, her bright green eyes defiant but questioning. "I was just wondering the same thing," she replies quietly.

The moment drags on in an agonizing haze as my wolf demands control, my grip on her tightening. Suddenly, the patrol appears from the dark, carrying the injured witch, who appears almost unconscious. Emily ducks under my arm, rushing toward them. "What did you do to her?" she demands.

McCabe sighs before muttering, "Nothing, I don't hurt little girls. Or little witches. She fell, running like a fool down a ravine. Lucky she's not dead."

Emily's angry features soften into something closer to concern. "Right, okay. Sorry."

McCabe nods, looking over at me. "We'll take her back to the clinic and get Doc to check her over."

I nod as the patrol starts walking ahead, and then turn back to Emily. "House. Now," I demand. "And don't ever do this again, or so help me, goddess, I'll have you confined to your room."

“You can’t tell me what to do,” she says quietly, and walks ahead of me in complete silence all the way down the trail.

I follow her, desperately trying to ignore the gentle sway of her hips or the way her defiance sent a jolt of lightning straight to my cock. I find myself considering more and more what it would feel like to just give in to her bewitching—it can’t feel worse than the torture of denying it.

Chapter 6 - Emily

Back in my room, I pace. Out of rage, worry, or indignation, I’m not sure. Probably a combination of all three. Tristen refused to let me accompany the witch to the clinic. Instead, I was sent back to the house, and he even made some of his betas wait on the porch to make sure I didn’t sneak out again.

Ridiculous.

I don’t even know that poor witch’s name yet. She’s obviously from an outlying small coven and looks barely sixteen—I’m surprised Malik hasn’t already snapped her up. By the looks of it, she doesn’t trust anyone. And probably for good reason. I doubt she’ll trust shifters anymore after tonight. Or me—she probably thinks I lured her there just to get snatched. It was a miracle she called at all; my coven sisters tried to reason with her, but she preferred to stay out in the forest. We barely got a chance to talk before Tristen turned up and ruined everything, but it sounds like Malik overcame their magical defenses, and she was the last one left.

Does that mean he’s going to break through ours, too?

We’ve long suspected the runes wouldn’t hold. Malik can absorb powers from different supernatural species; it stands to reason that if he gains enough magic, he’ll be able to eliminate the runes. However strong they are, there must be a limit. We’ve

tweaked them several times, increasing their potency as we try different variations, but the fear that Malik could simply walk straight through feels frighteningly realistic after talking to the girl.

And here I am, locked in my room like a naughty child. I may not have any practical magic, but I've adapted and made myself invaluable with my knowledge of runes. I need to talk to the girl and work out if our defenses remain stronger.

I may not really be a luna; it was a fake bond. Tokenism. But I feel a responsibility for the magical defenses, or at least the theory behind our runes. I still need my sisters to actually enact the magic, something that I will always find embarrassing. Most of them are nice about it. If anything, they just pity me. But living in a coven with no magic isn't always easy, and the kindness of a few never quite countered the outright hostility of the others. I know Marian only let me stay because she loved my mother, and for that, I know I should be grateful.

Witches like to think they're so different from shifters, but the truth is that both value strength. They just demonstrate it in different ways.

Running a frustrated hand through my long hair, I stop pacing and sit on the bed, my previous rage quickly fading to sadness and an overwhelming sense of hopelessness. I allow myself a rare moment to wallow in it all, finding myself pulled back to that night in the forest with Tristen when he rejected me. The whole thing feels like a weird dream, and I still struggle to understand why it has affected me so much.

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I didn't know him; he was a stranger. Yet, when he held me, I knew we were meant to be together. And I know he felt it, too. It was as though our entire future together was a forgone conclusion. My soul felt instantly at peace. He rejected me because I'm a witch, and the irony that I'm a useless witch only makes it sting even more.

And now here I am, trapped in this room, in this alliance, with the man who hurts me every time I look at him.

Well, that's not quite true. He makes me feel other emotions, too, but somehow, hurt and anger seem the easiest to deal with. When he held me pinned to that tree, I thought for a moment he was going to kiss me. I was so angry with him, yet I knew if he had, I'd have welcomed it. I'm so weak; it's pathetic. I promised myself I would never be weak—or weaker than I already am—but I find his presence completely overwhelming. My body responds to his as if played by an invisible force.

Shifters have destined mates, but witches do not. I don't know why my soul feels so intrinsically linked to him. All it does is hurt me even more.

I stay there, lost in thought, until I'm pulled from my reverie by the beam of headlights as someone turns into the drive. The familiar truck's engine cuts out as Tristen slams the door, talking in hushed voices to his betas. He's probably sending them back out to finish the patrol, as it will be morning soon. I look down at my clothes, knowing I should get some rest, but my mind and body are too fired up and too on edge to rest.

I hear the main door open and close. Normally, Tristen moves so quietly through the house that I'm never sure if he's here or not. He also never approaches my side of the

house. This is a dance we've been doing for weeks now, so when I hear his footsteps approaching my door, I freeze. Is he just checking that I'm still here? Is he not done arguing and laying down the law?

His footsteps stop right outside my door, and I force myself to stay calm. This is Tristen, after all. His presence seems to overpower everything, even with a solid wooden door between us; I feel his power. He's obviously hesitating, and for a moment, I wonder if he's just going to walk away.

"Emily," he finally says, his voice low and rough as he knocks loudly on the door. "Are you awake?"

I consider a sassy reply, considering the knock was loud enough to wake the dead—well, I am now, asshole—but my words die in my throat as I stand and reach for the handle, my hand feeling annoyingly shakey.

I open the door a fraction, and he pulls it the rest of the way to reveal himself in the hallway. He looks me over, seemingly taking in the fact I'm still dressed, a frown marring his handsome features. He's obviously tired and on edge, but it does nothing to detract from his raw magnetism. But there's a darkness to him tonight that isn't usually there, one I've rarely witnessed. However, when I have, it's usually directed at me.

"How is she?" I ask, ignoring his gaze, which feels like it's scorching my skin. "Is she okay?"

He sighs, leaning slightly against the solid door frame. "She's fine, beaten up by the fall, but she'll recover, " he finally says. "She's feral, but seems to like one of the nurses, so she'll stay with her tonight. You can talk to her tomorrow."

We stare at each other for a beat. "Am I supposed to say thank you?" I mutter, not

forgetting his harsh words out on the trail when he ordered me home.

He scoffs. "A little gratitude would be nice," he growls. "Do you have any idea how much danger you were in out there?"

He's probably not wrong, but I huff anyway. "It wouldn't be the first time I've dealt with trouble."

"And once again, it's me that has to save you, witch," he snaps, the term witch as derogatory as ever.

"The only problem tonight was you turning up and spooking that poor girl, causing her to have an accident," I retort. "You didn't save anyone; you just made everything worse. As usual."

He rolls his eyes, pushing off the door and stepping closer to me. "Is that right? And, just what else have I made worse, Emily?"

I want to say, you've broken my heart and made me doubt myself, made me sad, made me feel as though I'm not worthy of love. Made me feel less than... But I don't, I can't. I'm so transfixed by his gaze that I barely even register that he's stepped closer again. He's now in my room, and although I instinctively step back, too, he's beginning to crowd me.

A voice in the back of my head tells me to put some space between us, not lose myself to the strange pull he has over me. Looking into his amber eyes, it almost looks as though he's waging a similar internal war, as I see the conflict dancing across his expression.

A conflict he loses the moment he reaches for me.

Time seems to stand still around us as I allow him to pull me against his hard, unyielding body—it's almost like back on the trail. But this time, it's not done with anger, but instead, a passion that I wasn't expecting. His mouth crashes down on mine, and I gasp at the intensity.

His strong arms wrap around me tightly, pinning me against his chest as he deepens the kiss, and I melt into him. His scent, a heady mix of the forest night and his masculinity, is overwhelming, yet I crave even more. I feel his hand in my hair, tangling my long locks around his fingers as he tugs me closer. The sound of our breathing echoes around us as he parts his lips slightly, his tongue dancing along my bottom lip. I open to him greedily, allowing him access to my mouth.

His taste is nothing short of addictive, and the memory of two years ago comes rushing back to me in full force. Despite everything I ever told myself about what I'd do if he kissed me again, it all goes out the window as my hands find their way to his shoulders, digging in slightly as I try to get closer still. His skin feels like warm silk under my fingertips as we explore each other's mouths hungrily. It isn't a gentle or tender kiss, but it's not exactly rough, either; it's a claiming. The one he denied me at our ceremony. One that makes me want to cry out with pleasure while at the same time making me want to beg for even more.

The kiss goes on, turning ever more primal, and I'm not sure who's leading who. We crash into the wall behind me, our bodies pressed together, and I feel his arousal digging into me. His hands begin to roam, and my breath hitches as he finds my breast, squeezing gently through my shirt. His teeth scrape lightly along my jawline before his lips return to mine, his tongue delving deeper this time and scattering all rational thought.

I hear myself moan into the kiss, unable to stop myself. It's been so long since he touched me like this, and I didn't realize how much I needed it. How much I craved it.

I'm dimly aware as his hand moves lower, dipping beneath the band of my yoga pants. Suddenly, the daze I've been in begins to lift. My heart hammers in my chest as his fingers slide over my mound and dip between my folds. It feels incredible, but I can't help but feel the waves of panic beginning to overtake me. No man has ever touched me before, and it suddenly all feels too much—I know how Tristen really feels about me, and just because he wants my body right now, it doesn't mean he'll feel the same way tomorrow.

His fingers slide tantalizingly close to my entrance, and I feel my hips rock almost involuntarily. One of his fingertips slides inside my entrance. "Fuck, you're so tight, baby," he breathes hot against my ear.

A pinch of pain, and I panic, pushing hard against him. He staggers back, his hand is gone, and I miss it almost immediately, but I shake off the thought. As my head clears, there's an unmistakable scent of sex and desire in the room. Tristen is breathing heavily, his wolf dancing in his eyes. He looks more wolf than man right now, and I wonder if he's even capable of stopping. A moment or two passes, and I see him slowly coming back to himself.

He lets out a long breath, "I should go," he says. "Unless you want me to stay?"

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Please stay. I think, but instead, I reply, “You should go. I won’t just be a mistake to you.”

He wavers for a moment, and I wonder if he’s going to say something more, but then he nods and simply walks away. As the door closes behind him, I release a breath I didn’t even realize I was holding and give in to a tremble that wracks my whole body, my core aching. If I thought he had ruined all other men for me after our first kiss, the touch of his hands on my body is even worse. I fear I will never experience true love while Tristen keeps me wanting him like this.

Chapter 7 - Tristen

I ignore the sound of my men training around me and focus all my attention on the target in front of me. The only target that would volunteer for something as foolish as this—my brother, Aiden.

We’ve been using our powers against each other since we were pups, sometimes in jest and other times in outright conflict.

Aiden and I had a very specific game growing up, and although we haven’t challenged each other in a very long time, I’m no less determined to win now. In fact, with a deep sense of frustration and never-ending rage coursing through my veins, I think a victory is just what I need right now. Aiden isn’t going to know what’s hit him.

My brother’s gift is fire; being the youngest, it took him a bit longer to master his skills. I took great delight in blowing out his early attempts to harness his fire, much

to his annoyance, and so it became a game of sorts. As Aiden grew stronger, so did our contests. What once took a simple harnessing of the wind now requires a hurricane. And right now, there's nothing I'd rather bring.

I'm not sure what shocked me more: how responsive Emily was to my touch or the fact that she rejected me. She rejected me. I finally give in to her bewitching, and she rejects me—more witch mind games.

I bite back a growl as I close in on Aiden, watching his hands begin to glow with fiery anticipation. I can taste the sweetness of victory already. There's simply no way I'm in the mood to back down today. The wind around me picks up, sending leaves and twigs swirling in a chaotic dance. My eyes lock onto Aiden's, silently challenging him to meet my pent-up fury head-on.

Aiden's lips curl into a smirk as he raises his hands, fire igniting the air between us. "You really think you can take me, Tristen?" he taunts, amused by our lifelong battle of wills.

"I know I can, brother," I chuckle darkly.

Without another word, we unleash our powers on each other. The heat from his flames singes my skin even as I direct a volley of hurricane-force winds at him, pushing him back against the tree line that borders the training ground. Our respective elements illuminate our bodies. The rest of the pack stops their training session to watch us, riveted by our magical and primal display of dominance. It's true that other shifters have been born with magic, but our family is rare in that we all have it. A fight like this between shifters who aren't trying to actually kill each other is unique.

The battle rages on, with neither of us willing to give an inch. We always were the most stubborn, and Callum often has to be the voice of reason, but he's not here today. He's with Ava as she nears the end of her pregnancy.

The sound of our fight echoes through the forest, drawing even more interest from the other shifters who've gathered around to watch us. Aiden is strong, but I'm feeling stronger today, driven by my feelings of frustration and the need to channel my rage somewhere. My hurricane grows fiercer, tearing at his clothes and hair as I drive him back further into the woods. He retaliates by summoning a wall of fire that threatens to engulf me.

I roar with rage as the fire whips at my clothes, burning my arm, and shift at the same time Aiden does. To outsiders, it may look like we're two adversaries set on fighting to the death. But the truth is, our fights usually end this way, our wolves tearing into each other until one concedes. And it won't be me today.

I sense Aiden is tiring of the fight, but I'm enjoying the distraction of adrenaline flowing in my veins, and I slam into his side, sending him flying. He growls a warning at me, hackles raised, and I see red circling him.

"Enough," Ryan says, stepping between us. It's something very few would do, and I can sense his apprehension as he holds his hands aloft. The crowd is holding its collective breath to see what we'll do next.

I'm not sure if it's my brother finally tiring of the fight or Ryan stepping in that breaks my concentration. Either way, my powers begin to dissipate, and I shift back into human form, panting heavily from the exertion. Aiden does the same; both of us are breathing hard as we stare each other down.

"Well," Aiden says bitterly, spitting out some blood. "You're certainly spoiling for a fight today. What's gotten into you?"

Ryan relaxes slightly and smirks at him. "Not what, who, I'd say."

Immediately, I feel my hackles rise again, and I have to temper my reaction, well

aware the crowd is waiting to see if I can get a hold of myself. “Don’t fucking try me today, Ryan,” I snarl, and walk off to get some water.

Training resumes around me, and I’m glad for the temporary respite. My wounds are healing already, thanks to the shift. I look over at Aiden and see him laughing with some of the betas; I shake my head. It’s amazing how literally nothing ruffles him. Even after a fight that would piss most wolves off, he just shakes it off and moves on to the next thing. Some might think it’s because he’s so laid back, but sometimes I wonder if he’s just a bit too used to playing the nice guy, and one day he’ll really explode.

I don’t have long to think about Aiden’s quirks as the alarm on my phone sounds, and I hear similar alarms going off around the training ground—someone has sounded the alarm, and the runes have been triggered. The fight is forgotten as men pile into trucks, Aiden following as the alert is coming from close to his border. A small village I’ve long worried was vulnerable appears to have finally been attacked by rogues.

There are screams in the distance as we race towards the village, fire and smoke billowing into the sky. It’s a sight that chills me to my bones, and I can feel my wolf rumbling with rage. Jumping down from my truck, I immediately spot some rogues on the road, obviously intending to move further into my territory. I set to work with my betas, killing the stragglers and clearing a path for us to get closer to the burning buildings.

We find some of the villagers huddled together, mainly women and children, many wounded and scared out of their minds. The sight fills me with rage. I send some betas to help them while I lead others to help the men fighting the rogues, still trying to escape. It’s chaos, but I thrive in it. My wolf, who had to be contained in my earlier fight with Aiden, finally lets loose, and my frustration dissipates somewhat as we start taking down our enemies one by one.

One of the men from the village I instantly recognize, Samuel, turns to me, his face covered in blood from the fight. “You need to get men down the trails,” he says, the urgency clear in his voice. “They broke through here, but we all heard them saying they needed to get to town to destroy more runes. They’re destroying all the runes.”

I nod, calling over to Ryan. “Take half the men and follow me. The others stay here with Aiden and see to the wounded.”

I fire off a message to the team back in town, warning them of the threat and having them send men up the trail, hoping we can cut off any intruders.

Ryan nods, and we shift, breaking through the underbrush and out onto one of the main trails in the direction Samuel indicated, our senses on high alert for any sign of rogues. Thoughts of Emily flicker in and out of my mind, and I try to shake them off; I know she’s protected in town. Everyone is. That should be enough. But somehow, it’s not. The thought that something may happen to her, that she could be caught up in an attack...being defenseless, she’s completely vulnerable. The self-defense training was supposed to help prepare the witches for an attack, but if anything, it only highlighted how physically weak they are. Sure, I wouldn’t want to mess with Marian and her sisters using the full force of their craft, but that isn’t always enough to stop a multi-shifter attack—and it certainly isn’t enough to stop Malik. Emily doesn’t even have that.

Thoughts of Emily spur me on, and as we break through a clearing, I pick up the scent of unfamiliar wolves ahead. I double down, soon spotting them up ahead with my betas from the town also closing in from the east. It’s a perfect setup for an ambush, and I almost grin as I line up my first target.

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We charge forward, the pack moving as one as we begin to take down the rogues easily. It might have been a different story if they'd surrendered, but they're as battle-ready as we are and eager for a fight that we're more than happy to bring. My wolf is in its element now, and I let it loose, sinking my teeth into their necks without a second thought. This is what I need. To be doing something about this Malik situation instead of just sitting around waiting. Taking some of his rogues out—rogues who destroyed that village—feels righteous. This fight cleared my head better than my previously restrained one with Aiden, and I'm happy to let my wolf rule briefly, taking what he needs.

The dust settles, and with the rogues dead, we check the surrounding area for more but don't catch any lingering scents. After dispatching a further patrol just in case, I call Marian to send more witches to replace the runes. I could call Emily; I should call Emily. She is in charge of the overall rune strategy, but for some reason, I don't. I want her at home, not out here surrounded by all this death and the lingering threat of further attacks while the runes aren't active.

I circle back to the village and help with the cleanup, finding Aiden and sorting out some of the alarms to see what can be salvaged. He looks up when he sees me approaching, taking in my torn clothes and disheveled appearance that somewhat matches his own.

“Been a hell of a day. I only came out here for some bonus sparring,” he laughs, the smile not quite reaching his eyes this time.

“Got more than you bargained for?” I sigh.

He shakes his head, turning over one of the broken runes. “Nah, it’s always a pleasure to take down some of those bastards.”

“Damn right,” I mutter and then wave my hand at the pile of runes. “Marian is sending some witches to set those back up.”

“Well, I hope Em’s got some bright ideas to stop this happening again,” he says.

I shake my head. “Emily is back at the house. She doesn’t know yet.”

Aiden looks taken aback. “She’s the rune queen, isn’t she working on something new for these?” he asks. “She’ll be pissed you didn’t tell her.”

“She’s pissed at me for a lot of things,” I reply sharply, realizing too late I’m giving away more than I intend.

Aiden chuckles. “I see. That’s what Ryan meant earlier—who, not what. Trouble in paradise?”

I roll my eyes at him. “A fake union to get the witches to toe the line is hardly paradise.”

“Of course, I forgot how selfless you are, brother.” Aiden laughs, but doesn’t risk saying more. I look away and see Marian and her sisters arriving. Sighing, I run a hand through my hair. Just what I need—more witches.

It’s late by the time I get back to the house, and I’m more tired than I have been in a long time. I instantly know Emily is in her room, her uniquely alluring scent calling to me. I stand in the hall, my hand twitching as I recall how tight she felt around my fingers. Hot and tight. After all the violence and death today, something within me calls for me to go to her, sink into that heat, and forget everything.

Knowing she'd reject me again, I force myself to turn and walk away. Deep down, I know fucking her wouldn't change anything. However much my wolf protests.

Chapter 8 - Emily

"So, let me get this straight," Ava mutters thoughtfully. "He didn't even tell you about the attack? Or that the runes were destroyed?"

I shake my head, even though she can't see me over the phone. "No, I had to hear it from Marian when she called asking about how we're progressing with the updated runes. It was so embarrassing that I didn't even know about the attack."

Ava lets out a breath. "Did he tell you why he didn't tell you?"

"No," I sigh. "To be honest, I haven't asked him. I know why he didn't. He thinks I'm useless and went over my head to the proper witches."

I can almost hear Ava shaking her head vehemently. "No, no. No one thinks that, Em," she says. "Everyone knows how vital you are to the work with runes. We wouldn't be as safe as we are now without your help."

"Not safe enough, though, apparently," I reply sadly, thinking of all the people who were hurt in the latest attack and how the runes failed. "The runes will fail again, and then what?"

Ava's silence speaks volumes. As she nears the end of her pregnancy, I can't imagine how worried she is about all this, especially as she's already experienced Malik's evil intentions when he kidnapped her lovely daughter Harper. But Ava is one of the strongest women I know; she takes a deep breath before replying, "Then we will keep finding solutions. You said yourself, the new runes are stronger."

Suddenly, I hear raised voices coming from somewhere in the house. Tristen and some others I don't recognize.

"I'm going to have to call you back; something's going on," I tell Ava, saying goodbye and heading out of my room into the hallway, following the sound of the men's voices.

I realize it's Ryan and a couple of the other betas with Tristen, and they're talking about the attack. "We need to reinforce the runes and send an extra patrol to the area. It's still vulnerable," Ryan says as I turn the corner.

"Rogues have been seen checking the border there," Kris, one of the other betas, confirms.

Before Tristen can say anything, my presence is noted, and they all turn to where I'm standing. I see the subtle way he grinds his jaw, clearly not happy that I'm here. "Please, don't let me stop you talking about the attack on our pack. It sounds like you need the new runes?" I say, not even hiding my tone.

I've spent weeks working with some of my sisters from the coven to perfect a new set of defensive runes that offer stronger and more far-reaching protections. They should block entry to anyone not from the individual packs, meaning anyone wanting to move between territories would need to do so through the checkpoints. Our current runes only stop wolves not linked to an alpha from crossing their boundaries, but they're easier to confuse, which is probably how the latest attack happened.

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Tristen pauses, seeming to consider his words before speaking. “We do,” he replies. “If you could give them to Ryan, he’ll take them out to the border.”

I huff slightly under my breath. He’s still not going to directly mention the attack, and he thinks I’m just going to hand over the runes. “You need a witch to set up the runes.”

“I’m sure we can find one,” he replies tightly.

Now, I really roll my eyes, ignoring the awkward looks the betas are giving each other. “I will go; they’re my runes. I can do the setup faster than anyone.”

A tense silence descends for a moment before Ryan speaks up, “If we go now, we’ll be back by this afternoon, and the border will be secure for the night.”

I don’t miss the daggers Tristen shoots toward Ryan, but eventually, he sighs. “Fine. I’m needed at the port to meet Nolan’s shipment. Keep me informed,” he says. Ryan nods before walking away with the others, leaving us alone.

Tristen turns to me. “If there’s any trouble, just run. Ryan will sort it.”

“Wow, you really do think I’m useless, don’t you?” I snap.

His jaw ticks again before he shakes his head. “Not useless. Just vulnerable and stubborn.”

“Well, I’m neither of those things,” I say, walking away without another word. Once

outside, I consider how ironically stubborn I probably appear, but shake it off. I'm going to prove to him that I'm a vital part of all this and can be useful. Working with the runes is the only thing my coven ever gave me credit for, and I'll be damned if Tristen tries to keep me from it.

I sit in the back of the truck, and the drive is relatively quick, given the steep incline to the forest border. When we arrive, I see the devastation from the attack laid bare; the completely unnecessary destruction of people's homes is becoming frighteningly common, but it makes me so angry.

We exit the truck, and Ryan hands me the bag of runes from the back. It's so quiet out here. You could hear a pin drop. "Where is everyone?" I ask as we both glance around.

Ryan seems to scan the air. His shifter eyesight is superior, so he scans the tree line. "I can't detect anyone," he mutters. "That's weird. They should be here. Samuel was going to start clearing the debris, and I offered to help."

Kris steps around the truck, his eyes scanning the area, too. "The thing is, I can't scent anything. Like anything at all. Not even you two, and I'm looking right at you."

Ryan's eyes go wide, and he opens the truck door. "In. We need to get out of here. It's a trap."

"But where are Samuel and the villagers?" I gasp, throwing the bag of runes onto the back seat. As I turn back to look at Ryan and Kris, my heart drops, and I see a group of rogues emerging from the tree line behind the houses. "Oh my goddess."

Ryan spins around to face the oncoming threat. "It's okay, Emily. Just hold the runes and stay down." Turning to Kris, he says, "There are only six of them; we can take them."

His confident tone reassures me somewhat, and I try to steady my breathing, determined not to appear as useless as everyone thinks I am. While the men take up defensive positions, I open the bag and grab some runes, running around the truck to fortify our position. Ryan looks over and realizes what I'm doing, nodding in encouragement as the rogues approach. They're laughing, which seems odd; they seem completely unconcerned.

Ryan turns to me. "We'll take these on. You finish setting up the runes, and then we'll use that protection to get the hell out of here. I'll bring a full patrol back to look for Samuel. Okay?"

I nod and watch them advance, fumbling with the runes as my hands begin to shake. They're used to this; it will be fine, I tell myself as I begin the incantation. I watch as the fighting begins, almost unable to tear my eyes away from the brutality. Ryan and Kris are obviously exceptional fighters, but there are so many rogues. I know they seemed confident, but the fight appears fierce right from the start. I hear the cracking sound of bones breaking and the sharp intakes of breath as teeth clash.

A wave of nausea hits me, and I gag before realizing that the smell of blood and fear is overwhelming me. I've lived in fear for years, and now it's right in front of me once again. I close my eyes, trying to focus on the runes and what I have to do. When the last of the six rogues finally falls, Ryan shifts back and strides over to where I'm huddled beside the truck and helps me up.

"Come on, Emily," he says softly, "let's get you out of here."

"The runes should protect the t-truck," I stammer, climbing in.

He nods, wiping the blood from his face with his ripped shirt before pulling it back over his head. "Let's hope we won't need them and get back to town."

It's a classic case of famous last words, because before we can even get in the truck, we hear a battle cry and turn to see at least twenty more rogues appear through the trees. If that weren't bad enough, in the middle stands a man who looks so distinctive, so different, that I immediately know it's Malik.

Ryan pulls out his phone and hands it to me. "Get in the truck and call the patrols. Call Tristen. Now."

Malik and his rogues walk toward us but stop a short distance away. They appear to be waiting for his signal to attack. I fumbled with the phone, setting the pre-programmed alarm off and firing off a message to Tristen. After I press send, I look down at the message and realize the words make no sense; they are all spelled wrong, as my fingers are shaking so much.

"We should all get in the truck," I whisper. "The runes might protect us."

"From him?" Kris mutters, his face set in hard lines, clearly ready for the fight.

I glance over toward Malik, taking in his eerie form. His skin is so pale it almost glows, and his muscular frame and long robe look completely out of place next to his band of rogues. Without a word, he smirks as huge black wings fan out from behind him. I remember Ava telling me that he appears to be able to shift into a dragon and a wolf, which was hard to fathom until I saw it for myself.

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“Goddess, protect us,” Ryan mutters as Malik steps forward before pausing and staring at us quizzically.

“And who do we have here?” Malik says in a hushed voice that echoes around the clearing. He almost appears to be peering around Ryan, who is standing in front of me. “Now, this is a pleasant surprise.”

“What the fuck do you want?” Kris snarls, but Malik ignores him and turns toward his rogues.

“Slight change of plan today,” he says, almost jovially. “Kill the men, but bring me the girl. She’s an unexpected find. Rare.”

Ryan turns to look at me, his eyes wide. I shake my head, “W-what’s he talking about?” I whisper.

“We’ll worry about that later,” Ryan says, edging forward.

“Wait,” I say, grabbing two of the runes and handing one each. “I don’t know about Malik, but these should weaken any rogue that comes at you.”

The men nod, taking the runes, and advance. I can’t believe this is happening, I think as I watch the scene unfolding in front of me. They don’t stand a chance against this many rogues. I jump in the driver’s side of the truck and start the engine; perhaps if I can ram the rogues, we could outrun Malik.

The engine turns over, and I’m just putting it into gear when there’s a flash, a loud

bang, and smoke rising from the engine. I leap from the truck to see the front has a large hole in the side. Ryan and Kris look back, their mouths hanging open as Malik stands with his hand aloft, a ball of energy glowing at his fingertips.

“Run, Emily, just run,” Ryan yells. But I know there’s no point. We can’t defeat them on our own or outrun them.

Just then, I hear vehicles approaching from behind us, and turn to see Tristen’s truck and some others appear. Thank the goddess.

My relief is reflected in Ryan and Kris’s eyes as they welcome their pack members, who don’t hesitate as they leap from their trucks and advance on the rogues. “Malik is here, be careful,” I call out.

Ryan backs up slightly to meet Tristen, who is moving into the fray and standing between the rogues and me. “He wants Emily.”

Tristen’s gaze immediately flicks to me, and I see something indecipherable in his expression.

“Protect her,” he says to Ryan, who nods as Tristen shifts, leading his pack into the fight.

As chaos ensues around us, Ryan turns to me. “Can these runes protect us from Malik? Is that why he isn’t attacking himself?” he asks.

I nod. “We think so. He’d have attacked long ago properly if they didn’t work against him.”

Ryan looks thoughtful. “Right, let’s line them up, create a shield. They reach far, right?”

“Yes, if we can throw them down toward the edge of the clearing, they’ll line up with the older ones that run along the tree line,” I say, counting how many we have left.

We work quickly, using the truck for cover and placing or throwing the runes into a rough formation. It takes time, but we eventually manage to create a line that extends into the trees.

Ryan turns to me. “Let’s hope this works.” We both look out into the mass of bodies and wolves fighting, unsure of who is winning at this point.

I watch as the fight rages on, feeling helpless. Tristen is magnificent. His strength and speed are unparalleled. He’s a true leader. The runes begin to work, affecting Malik's rogues, causing them to appear disoriented when they get too close, helping Tristen and his men finish them off. The rune line is disturbed when a body crashes through two of the runes. I creep away from the truck to move them further out again.

I’m so caught up with what is happening right in front of me that I don’t notice Malik has circled around, his eyes blazing with fury as I see him approach. “Brave little witch, aren’t you?” he snarls before backhanding me across the face, hard. “We need to have a chat.”

I stumble back, dazed, as he closes the distance between us, his hot breath on my face. Just then, Tristen appears, blocking him. They circle each other warily, both waiting for the other to make a move. I can see the tension in Tristen’s stance; he’s ready to defend me with everything he has. Malik raises his hand, and I see the flicker of energy on his fingertips, but as he does, Tristen summons the wind, and a ferocious tornado sends Malik flying back across the clearing.

The whole world tilts as my vision clouds, my face burning where Malik hit me. The last thing I hear is Tristen’s voice as strong arms lift me: “I’ve got you.”

And then everything goes black.

Chapter 9 - Tristen

The drive back down toward the town is nearly silent, with the exception of Ryan's occasional groan as Kris tries to stem the bleeding from his wounds. Shifters heal fast, but some of his wounds are taking too long to stop bleeding, and I can see the concern written all over Kris's face. Ryan fought as hard as I could ever ask of one of my betas, and he's paid the price for it.

I glance back at his mangled form lying across the back seat, grinding my teeth with rage. "Tell him to hold on," I grind out, "we'll be at the clinic soon."

Kris nods, grabbing more towels from the back to stem the bleeding. I look at his side profile, noting his own injuries. They both put up a hell of a fight and protected Emily against unprecedented odds. My gaze flickers to her slumped form in the passenger seat next to me. Her tangled hair covers most of her face, but the scrapes, ripped clothes, and dirt clinging to her pale skin are still all too visible. Her whole being reeks of fear, and my wolf hates it.

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It's my fault. I never should have let her out there without a full patrol. It was supposed to be a quick job: replace the runes. Now we have missing villagers, including Samuel, a weak temporary border, and I nearly lost Emily.

I nearly lost Emily.

Along with Ryan and Kris.

I glance back at Emily. She passed out after Malik gave her a knock. I'm not sure if it was from the impact or stress; given his supernatural strength, it could have been much worse. Her breathing is steady, and she seems a bit more lucid now. I bring up Marian's number on the screen in the truck, calling her as we pull into town.

She answers on the third ring. "Marian, we need a group of witches to accompany a large patrol back to Samuel's village," I tell her. "Emily and my betas met Malik. They're okay, but the villagers are gone, and the border is barely secure. The patrol is already on its way."

I hear Marian's sharp intake of breath as she considers the ramifications of what I'm saying. "Emily is unharmed?" she questions, and it almost takes me by surprise. I think it's the first time I've heard her show any kind of concern or interest in Emily.

"She's okay. A bit beaten up," I reply.

"Mmm," the witch replies thoughtfully. "I'll come myself with some of the others now to secure the border with your patrol. Tell your men we're on our way."

Despite my feelings about the witches, Marian is a leader, and I knew she'd step up where Malik is concerned. I thank her, but a thought occurs to me before I hang up. "Malik wanted Emily," I blurt out. "Ryan said he specifically wanted her. Do you know why?"

Despite the seriousness of the situation, Marian actually cackles. "Goddess knows she has no useful magic. Her mother was one of the most powerful sisters our coven has ever known," Marian says, almost wistfully. "But Emily is not. Malik must know she is your mate, that is all."

My mate.

We hang up, and I concentrate on the road ahead, my mind running in overdrive.

"Kris," I say, turning my head slightly. "What exactly did Malik say about Emily?"

Kris sighs wearily, rubbing a hand over his stubble. "It was odd; he zeroed in on her. Something about her being rare."

"Not because she's my luna?" I push.

Kris thinks for a moment but shakes his head. "Nah, it was about her," he confirms. "You know, if it weren't for Em and her runes, if they'd just attacked, we'd be dead."

I nod grimly as we pull up to the clinic, with more questions than answers dominating my thoughts. Molly, our pack healer, and some of her nurses are already standing outside the clinic as we pull up, ready to receive Ryan and the other injured betas. I'm almost relieved to hear Ryan's complaining as he's helped from the truck—if he can complain, he'll probably survive, even if the injuries look bad now.

"What about Emily?" Molly asks as Kris and Ryan disappear inside. I look back at

Emily, who appears to be stirring. My wolf rages within me, desperately needing to get her home, away from everything and everyone.

“If she needs checking over, I’ll bring her back,” I say, climbing back into the truck. “She took a hit, but that’s it.”

Molly looks slightly disapproving, but she’s not going to argue with me. I can sense my wolf is already in my eyes, and I need to get out of here to coordinate the patrol at the border. I might be a selfish bastard and want to get Emily home, but I’m not stupid. I wouldn’t put her in danger if I thought she needed help. Knowing my men are getting the medical care they need, I slam my foot down and get back to the house as quickly as possible.

Taking the steps two at a time with Emily in my arms, I ignore my phone ringing in my back pocket until I get her settled on the bed. On my bed. I set her down and then stand back, watching how she seems to instinctively turn her head into my pillow, her hair fanned out around her on my sheets. My hands ball into fists at my side as I’m confronted with how close I came to losing her—if we’d arrived any later, they’d all be dead.

Like Samuel and his family? Are they dead?

I know my work is far from over today, so I turn away, heading toward my office next door to coordinate the border reinforcement and call my brothers for an alpha update. The words I have to deliver are already sticking in my throat.

Hours later, and with the border finally secure, my patrol and the witches have returned home. The news regarding the villagers is more mixed. They were clearing debris from the first attack when the rogues came. Most escaped into the forest, were tracked to neighboring houses and villages, and brought down to the town to be looked after. Samuel made a stand with two of the other men to give the others time

to escape. Their bodies were retrieved from behind what was left of the houses.

I only hope they knew their sacrifice meant their families survived.

Standing at my bedroom door, I lean against the door frame and watch Emily sleep. She looks far more peaceful now. Not wanting to wake her but feeling drawn to be close, I move silently to the side of the bed and sit back so I'm resting against the pillows. If she's aware, she doesn't object. In fact, she sighs in her sleep, turning toward me slightly.

I study her face in the half-light, the beauty of her pale skin and pink cheeks despite the scrapes and cuts from the fight. She was so brave, laying out the runes and not cowering away from Malik. My wolf urges me to rest now that I'm close to her, to hold her. Her scent fills my nose, a mixture of blood, fear, and something unique to her that calls to my wolf.

My fingers trace over the scrapes and bruises on her face, tracing the outline of a cut on her cheekbone. She looks so innocent, so fragile like this. I know she's anything but, really. She has a strength of will that demands I acknowledge it, and as much as I hate to admit it, I do respect it. She's fought demons and won—literal ones, today.

I have no idea how she'll react when she wakes to the events on the border or being in my bed. For now, I simply don't care. My wolf wants her here, and I'm done questioning it.

The first light is filtering through the open window when she stirs. I'm instantly awake, and my body tenses as she reaches out, half asleep, touching my chest. Suddenly, her eyes fly open, and she looks around in alarm, but doesn't remove her hand. In fact, she grips my shirt tightly in her fingers.

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I'm not sure what she sees in my eyes, but she freezes. Her hand stills on my chest, and she swallows hard.

"You're safe," I say softly, reaching out to caress her cheek. Her skin is like porcelain beneath my fingers, and it takes everything in me not to claim her mouth. "You're with me."

She blinks up at me, confusion warring with a hint of something else in her eyes. Longing? Desire? It makes me hard just looking at her like this.

Her gaze flickers to me again, and I feel the air change between us. It's like she's seeing me for the first time since that night in the forest when everything felt so right, and I don't want to scare her off. Not now. I lean down, brushing my lips against hers gently, tasting fear and something else—something that makes my wolf howl with joy. When she responds with a tiny whimper, I deepen the kiss, pressing her back into the pillows as my hand tangles in her hair. She tastes divine, and my wolf urges me on.

She groans into the kiss, pulling me closer until we're practically tangled together on the bed. My hands are tangled in her long, soft hair as her fingers fly to my shoulders before lightly dragging down my chest. She bites her bottom lip and moans softly against my mouth as I grind my erection against her core. Fuck.

Knowing I can't wait any longer, I pull back just enough to look into her eyes. "Are you sure?" My voice is rougher than I expect, and she nods shakily, and it's then that I sense her fear. "You've done this before?"

Her eyes dart away as her cheeks flush, telling me everything I need to know before she even speaks. "I haven't even..." she whispers, "since that night in the forest."

She's completely untouched. The thought floors me even as my bastard of a wolf rejoices, almost feral with the need to take her. I swear, my wolf would have me take her right here, but I can't. Not until she's ready.

I pull back just enough to kiss her forehead and brush the hair from her face. "We'll take it slow," I promise her softly, and she nods, eyes bright with unshed tears. Then she does something that takes me by surprise: lifting her body slightly, she pulls her shirt over her head, a small smile playing on her lips.

My wolf watches with hungry eyes as she reveals a lacy black bra that barely contains her full breasts. With a groan, I lean forward to lick one of her nipples through the fabric before tugging the delicate material aside and taking her in my mouth. Her scent is intoxicating as she moans again, arching into my touch.

I trail kisses down her stomach until I reach the waistband of her yoga pants, pulling them down slowly as I go until she's naked beneath me. My cock throbs at the sight; she's even more beautiful than I ever could have imagined. Her hips lift slightly in a silent plea as I slide my fingers through her folds, making her gasp. I chuckle as she tangles her fingers in my hair.

"Please," she whispers, and I willingly give her what she's asking for. My tongue delves into her heat as she cries out, hips bucking off the bed. I taste her arousal and feel her wetness against my lips, and it's all I can do to hold back from taking her right here, but I know she needs to be prepared first. I suck her clit into my mouth as I slide one and then two fingers into her tight entrance, stretching them slightly.

"So fucking tight, baby," I murmur against her skin. Her walls are already clenching around my fingers, so I scissor them while sucking her clit until she's crying out,

squeezing her thighs around my head. I know she's close, so I don't let up, curling my fingers inside her to stroke her inner walls as I flick my tongue back and forth on her sensitive bundle of nerves. My cock feels painfully hard, and I need to be inside her, but only when she's ready.

I feel the moment she comes, her beautiful face etched with a silent scream as her inner walls clench down on my fingers. Her passage was already tight, becoming almost painful around my fingers. I can't imagine how good it's going to feel around my cock. As she recovers, I know her body is ready to take me.

Slowly, I pull my fingers out of her heat and push her legs apart with my knee. I rub her arousal onto my cock as I line the head up with her entrance; her eyes flicker open to look at me in question, but she doesn't push me away. I take a deep breath and push inside her, inch by inch. Her tight heat clamps down on me, and I feel her flinch around me.

"Fuck," I say through gritted teeth. She feels impossibly good around me, but I don't doubt this might hurt her. "Sorry, baby."

I pause as she adjusts to my size, feeling each inch of my length disappear into her tight velvet channel. When I'm seated to the hilt, she looks up at me with tears in her eyes.

I lean down and kiss her tears away before looking back into her beautiful eyes. "You feel so fucking good," I growl against her lips, pulling back slowly until just the head is still inside her before thrusting again. She gasps, arching into the mattress as I start a slow but hard rhythm. Her tight walls clench around me over and over, making me grunt with the effort it takes to hold back and not let my wolf lose control.

Her nails dig into my shoulders as I watch her face contort in pleasure, and finally, I can't hold back any longer. I plunge into her again and again, fucking her hard and

deep until I feel the first wave of my orgasm hit me. She cries out beneath me, my body shaking with hers as I spill myself deep inside her.

I collapse beside her, panting hard as I try to catch my breath. Emily is still trembling beneath me, and I carefully pull out of her before rolling onto my side to wrap an arm around her waist. She tucks herself against me, her head resting on my chest. The room is silent, apart from our erratic breathing. I don't know what to say. But one thing I do know—once will never be enough.

Chapter 10 - Emily

Stepping out of the shower, I can barely see two steps in front of me due to the steam that has enveloped me. I grab one of Tristen's enormous towels and wrap myself in the fluffy warmth, enjoying the underfloor heating. Wiping the mirror, I can just about make out my reflection. The flush in my cheeks has only been emphasized by the heat of the shower, but it's the sparkle in my eyes that's undeniable.

Ever since that first night over a month ago, Tristen has made love to me every day. Including this morning. I never knew desire could feel so all-consuming, or addictive. It has been like a dam breaking; our pent-up passion is now channeled into our every encounter.

The moment he walks in the door, the way our eyes meet during pack meetings, in his office, in his truck...we are insatiable.

It's thrilling in a way I never fully understood or thought possible. And I sense a change in him; he's tender with me when we're together. Thoughtful and caring as he wrings pleasure from my body day after day. But beyond those encounters, the wall remains resolute. Sure, there are cracks in his previously cold exterior, and the way his scent clings to me must signal to any shifter that our relationship has changed, but you wouldn't necessarily know it if you watched us from a distance.

I know he's drawn to me physically; that much is obvious. But he's still happy to run from me, as demonstrated this morning, because he'd already left before I even got in the shower. It's as though he doesn't want to burst the bubble we find ourselves in by actually addressing what we're doing.

Deep down, I know this can't last. It's only a matter of time before he pushes me away again. He has done nothing to make me think his overall opinion about witches has changed. In fact, his frustrations over how we're working together only continue to grow. But I've also started to see a different side of him, a side I instinctively knew existed that night in the forest. I feel as drawn to him as ever, and I find myself unable to stay away. He makes me feel connected and alive.

But I have no idea how he feels about me.

I take a deep breath and head back to my room to find some clothes. I'm living in a strange in-between at the moment—sleeping in Tristen's room, but keeping my belongings separate. I need to change before Ava and Sarah arrive. Ava's already texted me twice, asking if I'm okay. She knows some of the details about the change in Tristen's behavior from his brother Callum. Plus, it doesn't take a rocket scientist to sense the tension between us.

Having never had close friends in my coven, I find it difficult to open up to others about what's going on in my life. Though if anyone could possibly understand, it's probably Ava after everything she went through with Callum—being rejected and then finding their way back together. I'm not sure I have it in me to lay bare the entire story, though. Some things are best left alone, especially as Ava is Callum's mate and Tristen's sister-in-law.

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After dressing quickly, I head toward the kitchen to put a fresh pot of coffee on before they arrive. I check my messages; one from Ava says they're just getting into town—nothing from Tristen. I'm not sure why I even hoped there would be—we live separate lives during the day, only sinking into each other when the world isn't watching.

Standing by the window, I breathe in the comforting smell of my fresh coffee as I watch Callum's truck pull up outside to drop them off before joining the pack at the training ground. Tristen's brother immediately jumps out and runs around to help his very pregnant mate out of the truck as Sarah looks on, giggling. It does look quite amusing, as Ava looks smaller than ever despite her very round belly.

Out of the blue, a wave of longing sweeps over me. That I could ever have what Ava has...a thought I brush off as quickly as it arrives, as the women wave goodbye to Callum and walk toward the door.

I plaster a smile on my face despite the turbulent emotions that threaten to bubble up, and I open the door to greet them. Ava spots me and waves, her face breaking out into a huge grin. Still holding my coffee, I walk out onto the porch to greet them.

"Hey, stranger," she teases, enveloping me in a hug as soon as she's within range. "It's been forever."

"I know," I sigh into her shoulder. She pulls back slightly, and I don't miss the way her wolf moves in her eyes, sensing something. I have a good idea what she's identified—that Tristen's scent is all over me.

“Okay, spill the beans, witchy,” she says, giggling as soon as we head inside. Sarah shuts the door behind us, her eyes alight with interest, too. “How is it going with you-know-who?”

I groan. “I should have known there was no hiding anything from you two,” I say as we walk toward the kitchen. “At least let me make some more coffee first. Decaf?”

Ava nods as Sarah comes around to help me. “Full strength for me,” she laughs. “I need it to cope with Callum’s fussing all the way here.”

“He wasn’t keen on you making the trip?” I ask, already knowing the answer.

Ava sighs. “We both know I’m not going to be going very far once this baby arrives,” she says, stroking her swollen belly. “I need to feel as though I’m contributing while I can. We’ve brought the books from the mainland with old stories about power absorption and shape-shifting. The only way to protect any of our children is to destroy Malik.”

The look on my friend's face is fierce and resolute. Malik kidnapped her daughter, Harper, and tried to steal her powers. Children are especially vulnerable, and I can see the rage that emanates from her coming straight from her maternal soul. It’s a sight to behold.

“It’s a good thing you’re not on caffeine, too,” I joke, handing her a cup of decaf.

“She is on a mission,” Sarah confirms, pouring our drinks before lifting the heavy bag of books onto the kitchen island. “She’s not wrong, though. There’s a lot to get through here. I’m hoping you know more than we do about some of this.”

We all fall into silent agreement as we take a sip of our drinks, and I eye the books, itching to get started. Just as I’m about to reach for a book, Ava interrupts, putting her

cup down. "As important as all of this is," she begins, the mischief clear in her voice. "You're going to have to fill us in on what has changed, because Tristen's scent is literally all over you. I mean, he's been all over you."

Sarah chuckles, "She's got you. So, what changed? This did not look to be in the cards at all."

I sigh, tapping the side of my cup as I debate what to tell them. How much to give away, and whether talking about it would help at all. "Okay, okay," I concede, knowing there's no point in denying it with their intense shifter senses. "Things have...changed. But probably not as much as you might think."

"So, are you or aren't you?" Ava pushes, a mischievous but hopeful glint dancing in her eyes.

"We are," I admit, tasting the coffee on my tongue. "But there's still so much distance between us."

"What do you mean?" Sarah asks, leaning in. "You're his luna, right? He must have chosen you because he likes you."

I roll my eyes. "In name only. I have no idea why he stepped up." I pause before continuing, "We met a couple of years ago in the forest...we kissed. But he rejected anything else because I'm a witch. I have no idea why he made me his luna. Or what has changed, really."

The words hang in the air as I watch their reactions. Ava's eyes widen, her mouth falls open slightly, and Sarah just looks confused.

"He what?!" Ava gasps, her hand going to her chest. "Why didn't you say anything? I don't understand why he rejected you?"

I take a deep breath, reliving that moment of heartbreak all over again. "He told me he couldn't be with a witch. He accused me of bewitching him, which would be amusing if it weren't so tragic. He's mentioned his father; I think he has a longstanding distrust of witches, and now he's too stubborn to change his opinion."

Ava snorts. "Typical wolf male," she mutters under her breath before turning to me. "And now?" she asks expectantly.

"Now," I say softly, looking down at my hands, "everything goes from being so perfect one moment to like strangers again the next. We just go back and forth, not getting anywhere. I'm not sure anyone else even knows."

Ava and Sarah exchange knowing glances. "Oh, I can assure you every single shifter knows," Ava says gently. "His wolf has imprinted on you big time."

Sarah touches my arm. "He may not be saying the words, but his wolf has laid his claim."

"At least one of them knows what they want," I reply dryly.

Ava looks thoughtful for a moment before speaking as she begins to pull out the texts from the mainland. "You know, I think Ralph did a real number on all of them. They didn't have it easy," she begins. "I'm not making excuses for them, but I've seen it in Callum, and I know he sees it in his brothers, too. But they're good men, good alphas. I think they just need to break free of Ralph's damage in their own ways."

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I nod, knowing there's truth in what she says. "I can't ask him, though. I know I won't get the answer I want, and I can't be rejected again," I say, tears welling in the corners of my eyes. "It's all I've known, and I won't purposelessly invite more in."

Sarah pulls me toward her, wrapping her arm around my shoulder. "You're stronger than you think, Em," she says as Ava nods encouragingly. "Let his wolf do the talking; he's clearly the one with all the brains."

At that, we all laugh, and it physically eases my soul. "Okay, enough about me, let's focus on something far more important," I say, turning to the stack of books Ava has arranged on the kitchen island. "Let's see if there's anything helpful in here at all."

We spend the next few hours pouring over the texts and making notes. Most are simply dusty stories in books shoved to the back of the shelves in a library on the mainland, but at least two texts stand out, clearly written by witches rather than humans. Although they are recorded as fiction, there are too many similarities with Malik's actions to be a coincidence.

I'd half hoped to find something in here about why Malik said I was rare when he attacked the village. I haven't mentioned it to anyone else because it feels silly. I am the least rare or special witch—unless you count not having any useful magic as rare, which I suppose it is. But it's certainly not anything Malik should have wanted. Unfortunately, the books don't mention anything I can attribute to my coven or me.

I'm still writing up our notes when Callum arrives to pick up Ava and Sarah. We say goodbye on the porch.

“I can’t believe the next time I see you, you’ll have a brand new pup,” I say, holding Ava tightly.

She laughs. “I really hope that’s true, because I can’t wait any longer. I’m going to tell Callum to drive over all the bumps on the way home.”

Sarah looks horrified. “You can’t go into labor on the road with me; I’m too squeamish. And Callum would have a meltdown.”

Ava grumbles but agrees and heads down the steps toward her mate, who greets her with a kiss that has us all blushing. Tristen’s truck pulls in just after him, and he catches their passionate embrace, his eyes finding mine as everyone says goodbye. A wave of desire sweeps over me, and I can’t help but feel like I’m on display. As they drive away, Tristen climbs the steps toward me, his gaze never leaving mine.

“You look tired,” he says as we turn to walk back into the house. Every step reminds me that we’re alone now.

“We’ve been studying these texts,” I say, turning toward the kitchen island to show him. But when I look back, his gaze has darkened, and he backs me up against the cool, hard surface.

His lips crash down on mine, his mouth demanding and desperate despite the fact that he already had me this morning. I surrender to him immediately, my body melting into his as the kiss deepens. I feel his wolf’s hunger for me, but more than that, I feel his need. And it scares me in the best possible way.

He lifts me onto the countertop, our kiss never breaking as he presses against me, one hand trailing down my back. Even through my clothes, I can feel the heat between us burning hotter with each passing second. His lips trail across my jawline and down my neck, nipping at the soft skin there before moving lower still.

“You know you’re mine,” he growls into my ear.

Do I?

But for once, I don’t even want to argue. I just want him.

Chapter 11 - Tristen

Emily turns in my arms, and I subconsciously draw her even closer. I’ve been half awake since first light, unable to quell the racing thoughts in my mind, did our defenses hold overnight? Are the new runes still as effective? Will my phone ring with another Malik attack? But Emily’s calming presence in my arms has offered me some peace, at least. If it weren’t for her perfectly soft frame pressed against my own, I’d have been up a couple of hours ago. I’d have gone running or hit the gym to try and rid my mind of Malik.

As it is, I run my hand down her bare side, marveling at the softness of her skin under my calloused fingers. She really is perfect, I think, aware that if I push aside the fact that she’s a witch, not a shifter, I cannot deny her perfection.

My wolf doesn’t even bother to deny it, which always strikes me as odd, as surely he should be more drawn to a fellow shifter. Ralph always said that a shifter would never want a witch unless she had bewitched him. The thought makes me uncomfortable, and as much as I try to shrug it off, I can’t deny that my desire for her borders on need. It certainly feels bewitching at times.

It feels so at odds to be content in the middle of this war with Malik and his rogues. Ralph may have been a mean old bastard, but he kept the island in check. A familiar feeling gnaws at my core as I wonder what he’d make of his sons’ efforts so far. He was always so critical of us, and yet he split the island into three, making us all alphas, which surprised me, as I was sure he’d insist we battle it out.

He always said he'd sooner see us dead than weak.

I'm sure he'd have rather seen me dead than lying in bed with a witch. But looking down at her pink lips, a tangle of soft auburn curls fanned around her, and full breasts pressed against me, I know I wouldn't change it—bewitchment or not.

Her brow furrows in her sleep, and although I'm a needy bastard who's itching to take her again and again, especially when she's naked and warm like this against me, I know how hard she's been working on those texts Ava brought over last week, studying until all hours. She probably needs this lie-in.

Suddenly, my phone vibrates on the nightstand, and I curse under my breath, knowing the moment of peace is over. Emily stirs in my arms, her eyes fluttering open as she looks up at me with her emerald eyes. "Wha—" she mumbles sleepily before seeming to realize exactly where she is and who is holding her. A blush of crimson creeps into her cheeks as she tries to sit up, tugging the sheets to her chest. "I've slept in," she mutters, looking away from me.

I squeeze her arm reassuringly. "It's fine, Emily. It's just...Aiden," I say, glancing at the caller ID. I reluctantly release her warmth and answer my phone, already dreading the reason Aiden would call this early.

"Yep," I gruffly answer, my voice still gravelly with sleep.

"Sorry to wake you, bro," Aiden says without preamble. My wolf stiffens in readiness for what he's going to say. It never seems to be good news these days. "I thought you'd want to know...we captured a group of Malik's men last night between our borders."

Now, that is unexpected and promising. Malik's men are rarely caught alive, and we've only been able to question a handful who didn't know anything.

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“That is good news,” I tell him, climbing from my bed and reaching for my pants. “Mind if I sit in?” I ask, knowing better than to step on another alpha’s toes, even if he is my brother.

Aiden chuckles over the phone. “Figured you’d want to. I’ve put a call into Callum, too,” he tells me. “We all need a break in this.”

“Damn right, we do,” I mutter, turning to see Emily has already slipped from the bed and is in the en-suite. As I hang up with Aiden, having agreed on a location, I pause, almost driven with pure need to slip into the shower with Emily. Shaking my head, I know I need to focus on getting to Aiden’s territory as quickly as possible. He’s done me the courtesy of extending an invite to the interrogations, but he’s not going to wait for me to arrive.

Just as I’m about to knock and tell Emily I’m heading out, the en-suite door swings open. I’m immediately struck by how pale she looks—almost nauseous. I reach my hand out to steady her.

“Hey, are you okay?” I ask. My wolf is immediately on alert with concern, which just annoys me for some reason.

“Yeah, I just feel a bit off,” she says wearily. “I read those books all day yesterday, for hours. I had a headache by the time I was done; I think it’s just that.”

It occurs to me that I have no idea if witches really get sick. Even our pack medic only deals with shifters. “Er, maybe you should get checked out. You’re seeing some of your sisters later? Your healer will be there?”

She nods. “Yeah, she is coming in to treat some of the rogue witches that have sought sanctuary. I’ll ask her,” she says, rubbing her eyes.

I lean forward to kiss her forehead; it’s almost instinctive, and I freeze for a moment, realizing that what began as purely sexual has morphed into something much more intimate. When I pull away, her usually guarded expression looks softer and more open, and her cheeks are flushed despite her paleness. I wonder if she’s thinking it, too.

The drive over to Aiden’s territory doesn’t take long, and I’m grateful to have picked up Ryan on the way; his inane banter distracts me from thinking about Emily for a while. I make a mental note to ask our medic about the need for someone with experience in treating non-shifters. I’m sure Emily is fine, but it made me realize there’s no one for a non-shifter to turn to in the town. I may not like or trust the witches, but I’m still the alpha, which means taking care of everyone.

By the time we reach the cabin Aiden uses as a makeshift holding cell for the rogues, the interrogation is obviously underway, given the screams radiating throughout the clearing. I have no more sympathy left to give these rogues. They’ve aligned themselves with Malik and killed so many good wolves. And witches, I guess. If I could ever have been accused of being too soft on them when they were the misfits living on the edge of our packs, causing low-level problems, that sympathy is long gone.

Now, I just want answers and an end to Malik. We all do.

As we enter the old cabin, Aiden glances up from the bloodied rogue he’s questioning. Callum obviously arrived earlier and is leaning against the wall with his arms crossed, a tense scowl on his face as he watches the proceedings. His beta stands next to him, looking as grim as he always does. The three of us have always been close, even before we became alphas. Now, we’re bound by duty and shared

loss more than ever.

“What have we got?” I ask, not sugar-coating it. I’m here for answers, not small talk.

Aiden straightens up, wiping his bloody hands on a rag nearby. “They’re tough bastards,” he admits, jerking his head toward the unconscious rogue on the floor. “This one won’t break easy.”

Callum pushes off the wall and cracks his knuckles. “I haven’t had a challenge in a while,” he smirks coldly.

The next few hours are a blur of interrogations that prove more useful as the day wears on—the rogues, obviously hearing the desperate pleas for mercy of the ones who go before and receive none, are more inclined to crack.

By the time the afternoon is done, we’ve garnered a lot of useful information about the rogue’s hideouts, how they’ve avoided capture, and their use of imprisoned witches who give them cloaking spells—but thankfully, can’t overrule the runes we’re currently using. It won’t take them much longer, though. Annoyingly, none appear to know where Malik came from or where he’s living. At first, I didn’t believe them, but after we enhanced our interrogation tactics, it’s clear they’d have broken if they knew anything.

Still, we’ve ended the day with a decent amount of new knowledge, which is something given how much Malik exists in a shroud of mystery. We offer to help Aiden’s pack to clean up, but he shoos us off, saying he’d never expect guests to tidy up after a party; taking in the blood-stained cabin as Ryan and I walk out, I mutter, “Hell of a party.”

“Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth,” Ryan laughs. “I wouldn’t want to be cleaning that up. Better to just torch the cabin and be done with it.”

“I think Aiden’s going to leave it standing as a warning; it’s right on the border, so the rogues will find it, and their men, eventually,” I say.

“Grim but effective,” Ryan mutters as we get in my truck. “Now, let’s get you back to your witch, though you might want to shower first.”

He indicates to my hands, and I look down, noting I’ve done a poor job of wiping the rogue’s blood from my hands. I wipe them on my pants with a grimace. “Very funny, just drive.”

I don’t argue, though; part of me is looking forward to getting back to her and sharing what we’ve learned today, but not the methods we used to get the information. I realize that I don’t want her to see that side of me. I don’t want her to think badly of me. That thought alone throws me off; I shouldn’t care. I think differently about her because she’s not a shifter; a shifter female would welcome my display of strength. Part of me wonders what a witch would think. Not that they aren’t vicious in their own way.

I drop Ryan off at the center in high spirits, flipping him the bird as he makes kissing noises through the window. I can’t help but crack a smile and drive back to the cabin feeling lighter than I have in a while. It wasn’t all good news with the rogues, and I wish we’d got a better lead on Malik, but some of the information was good. I know Emily will want to coordinate with the witches on some of it. Better she does it; Marian scares the life out of everyone else.

The door is unlocked, so I know Emily’s here, but the house is quiet when I enter. I follow her scent through the kitchen, pausing to wash my hands thoroughly and trace her to the back porch. She has her back to me, and it makes me chuckle when I consider how much easier it is to sneak up on a witch. A female shifter would have sensed me a mile off; there’s no element of surprise. But Emily remains blissfully unaware as I watch from behind the screen. She’s completely absorbed in her phone

conversation, pacing up and down the deck; the movement causes her dress to sway around her evocatively, and I pause momentarily, admiring her form and considering how much my hands itch to reach out and touch her.

I'm about to clear my throat and get her attention when I hear something that stops me cold. "I-I don't understand," she says, the tremble in her voice clear. "Are you absolutely sure I'm pregnant? Could it be a mistake?"

Pregnant.

My whole world tilts, and I don't really take in what she says next. She appears to be ending the call, though. I completely shove down my wolf, who is desperate to go to her, while the man in me rages. She knew this morning—she had to have at least suspected. And then it hits me; this is what she wanted all along. She's now luna and carrying my child, cementing her position and the witches within our pack.

She turns and sees me standing there; undeniable guilt flashes across her face. "Tristen," she murmurs, "I didn't know you were back."

She's not even going to tell me?

"Nothing you want to tell me?" I snap, and her head drops.

She sighs and leans back on the patio wall, "I take it you heard?" she says, gesturing to the phone in her hand. "I couldn't see the healer earlier, but I left a blood sample. She just called, and—"

"And what?" I cut her off. "You just found out your plan has worked?"

Her eyes immediately fly to mine, and I see the fire ignite in her gaze. "My plan," she repeats, slow and deliberate. "Are you out of your fucking mind? There is no plan."

If I harbor any doubts, I push them away as I double down. "Get pregnant and what? The witches become central to the pack. Was this Marian's plan? Bewitch me a—"

"You're an idiot," she says, interrupting me and storming toward the patio door. "I never bewitched you. I can work runes, but not spells. You must realize that by now. You got me pregnant, Tristen, stop acting like I did something to you."

She storms through the house toward the front door.

"Where are you going?" I demand.

"Away from you," she snaps, grabbing her purse.

Suddenly, I panic. What if she leaves the town? There are rogue sightings daily now

on the trails. “Wait,” I call out, and she turns, her hand on the door. “Stay in the town; it’s not safe.”

“Sure thing, Alpha,” she replies, slamming the door.

The house falls into complete silence apart from the ringing in my ears and the pounding of my head. Pregnant. I’m going to be a father. My child will be a witch-shifter hybrid. I don’t know what to think. But one thing is for certain: nothing can happen to Emily.

I pull out my phone and message Ryan, telling him to trail Emily without her seeing, make sure she stays in the town, and, for goddess's sake, don’t ask me any questions. He seems to read the room for once and simply replies with a thumbs-up. I sink into a chair, the weight of everything hitting me like a truck.

Pregnant.

Chapter 12 - Emily

I wake several times throughout the night, tossing and turning in my large, empty bed. Considering I have slept alone all my life, having only shared Tristen’s bed for a few weeks, sleeping alone shouldn’t feel so strange. And yet, it does.

After I stormed out, I walked around town, stopping at the bakery for some of Mrs. McCormik’s sweet buns before walking over to the refuge to share them with some of the young rogue witches. To be honest, I just wanted to do something practical with people who wouldn’t ask too many questions about my situation. I wanted to talk about their situations and completely ignore the fact I’d just found out I was pregnant, and Tristen practically rejected me and our baby on the spot.

I held it together remarkably well, staying at the shelter late into the night until it

became too obvious I was stalling. Then, I headed back to the house, hoping Tristen wouldn't be there—and he wasn't.

The whole house was shrouded in darkness, which might have been a bit intimidating if it hadn't been for the fact that Ryan had been stalking my every move all day and was right there if anything was off. I may not have shifter senses, but I'm not sure Ryan is cut out for surveillance work. He was the most obvious trail imaginable. Presumably sent to follow me and make sure I don't collude with my coven or run away before Tristen figures out what to do with me...and our baby.

Our baby.

And just like that, I'm wide awake again. My hand flies to my still-flat stomach as I stare at the ceiling in the early morning light. With no available distractions, I can't run from my reality. The saddest part is that when the healer told me, she sounded so happy for me, and for just a moment, although shocked, I found myself picturing a little child who looked like Tristen. But as quickly as the daydream appeared, it was shattered the moment I turned around and saw his face.

I don't know why I expected anything different. I've always known how Tristen feels about witches—the joke is on me. How many times does he have to reject me and everything about me before I take the hint?

But rejecting our baby, his baby. That's a whole different level.

I try to listen for signs of him in the house, wondering if he's going to come and check I'm here. The last thing I want to do is face him this morning. I'm angry, but I'm also wobbly as hell. I need to figure out my own head first.

I needn't have worried about him wanting to seek me out; by the time I hear him, it's the sound of the front door shutting. I close my eyes and sigh, determined not to cry,

before slipping from the bed and wandering over to the window. I just about catch his retreating form as he gets into his truck and pulls out without so much as a backward glance. I'm about to turn away when someone else catches my eye. I roll my eyes at the figure sitting in his truck, drinking a coffee on the other side of the road and clearly watching the house and me: Ryan.

I guess no one got much sleep last night.

Sighing, I sit back down on the bed and pick up my phone. Part of me wants to shove all of this deep down and not deal with any of it. But becoming a mother isn't something I can just ignore, and if there's one person who will understand what I'm about to go through and what it means to be rejected, it's Ava.

I almost hang up as soon as the ringing starts, but she answers so quickly I don't have a chance.

"Hey Em," she says, concern in her voice, "everything okay?"

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I wonder how she knows, but then I glance at the time and realize I've called extremely early. Way too early. "I am so sorry," I say, "I've just seen the time. I'll call back later."

"No, no," she says quickly before I can hang up. "We're up. The joys of being heavily pregnant."

Ava laughs lightly, and I try to join in, but I'm painfully aware that it comes out more as a splutter as the reference to pregnancy hits me like a sledgehammer. Ava's laughter trails off, and she pauses before continuing in a far more serious tone, "What's wrong, Em?"

For someone who rarely opens up...to anyone, I spill the whole sordid ordeal to Ava in one long, emotional outburst, from the depth of my connection to Tristen and how I thought he was changing his mind about me, to feeling sick, the healer, finding out I'm pregnant, and Tristen's awful reaction and accusations.

When I finally finish, there's a long pause at the end of the line, and then I hear a male voice raised in concern. "Ava, are you there?" I ask uncertainly.

"Yes, honey," she replies soothingly despite the hushed voice, which I know to be Callum's, in the background. "Callum heard some of that and is about to bash his brother's thick head in. I can't believe he's doing this. Are you okay? I...hang on."

I hear more muffled conversation, and then Ava sighs and comes back on the line. "Okay, so Callum's about to go have a proper chat with his idiot brother. I think Tristen's about to get his ass handed to him."

I cringe at the thought of Callum and Tristen arguing, “Is that a good idea? I mean, they’re both alphas, and this isn’t really Callum’s business...”

Ava cuts me off. “This isn’t alpha business; it’s family business,” she reassures me. “Besides, Callum is well placed to talk about rejecting a mate and child, even though he didn’t know about Harper. He’s missed so much, and it sounds like Tristen needs to talk through his stupid issues.”

I sink back into the headboard and run my hand through my hair. “I didn’t call you to get Callum to fight my battles, you know.”

“We know that, Emily. But that’s Callum’s niece or nephew you’re carrying; you’d better believe he’s going to have words for his brother if he needs to hear them,” Ava replies firmly. “I need to know you’re okay.”

I smile at her words, feeling the warmth of someone else’s care wash over me. Having lost my mother as a baby, I was looked after by the coven, but I wouldn’t say I was cared for. I was passed around among several families who raised me with their children. It wasn’t all bad, and until I became a teenager and realized how much I truly lacked in the magic department, I had some happy memories. But true warmth isn’t one of them. As I chat to Ava about pregnancy, I find my hand resting on my stomach again, almost in awe at the thought of having my own child. I won’t let Tristen or anyone else ruin it. A singular thought crystallizes in my mind:

I don’t need Tristen to love this baby—I have enough love all by myself.

I say goodbye to Ava, feeling lighter than before I called, despite the impending fallout from Callum confronting his brother. Ava pointed out that men, especially shifters, don’t talk enough. The brothers are no different. Apparently, it took Callum a long time to forgive himself for his actions with Ava. So I guess he has something he needs to say to Tristen on the subject—I don’t think anything will change Tristen’s

opinion, but if it helps him to be a father to our child one day, then I'm not going to stop Callum from trying.

Ava mentioned that Callum was concerned that Malik had singled me out during the attack at Samuel's village, and she was pretty pissed that I hadn't mentioned it myself. I already know there's nothing special about my lack of magic, and my limited research hasn't provided any clues, but it has got me thinking about what a half-witch-half-shifter baby would be like. And I suppose part of me wonders if my powers may skip a generation. After all, my mother was one of the most powerful witches on the island, and surely, all that generational power didn't just evaporate with me.

By the time I'm dressed, the sun is up, and I don't think Tristen will be back anytime soon. I grab my bag and walk out of the house to where Ryan is still sitting in his truck across the road. I notice him sit up a little straighter as I approach, and I can't help but smile as a guilty look flashes across his features. I can't believe he honestly didn't think I'd notice his less-than-subtle presence. If he's going to stalk me, he might as well give me a lift. The coven might know something about hybrid babies or at least point me in the right direction.

"Fancy just driving me where I'm going rather than trailing after me?" I ask as he puts the window down.

I see him weigh up his options for a moment before he smirks, "Sure thing, where are we heading? Nowhere that's going to get me in trouble, I hope?"

"The coven," I reply. "I need to speak to Marian."

Ryan nods, and I walk around the truck to climb into the passenger side. As I shut the door, I notice he's firing off a text—updating Tristen, no doubt. I wonder how much Ryan knows about what's going on, but as we drive, he chats about anything and

everything, and it's clear he has absolutely no idea that I'm pregnant or why he's been tasked with stalking me.

"Do you know where Tristen is today?" I ask, feigning innocence.

Ryan eyes me cautiously for a moment, almost as if he's debating what to tell me. "Last I heard, he was heading out to the training camp to check on the youngest recruits, but then Callum called, so I'm not sure. Why?"

"No reason," I lie, keeping my eyes on the road ahead so I don't have to look at Ryan, worried my eyes will give me away. The road to the coven takes us to the edge of the territory, and they've laid additional runes along the road. There is also a final checkpoint at the entrance to the road leading out to the coven house itself. We pull up to the small hut, and one of the older witches, Samantha, sticks her head out. She immediately brightens upon seeing Ryan, flashing him a smile that knocks years off her with the help of a glimmer spell. I roll my eyes as Ryan laps up the attention.

"Well, hello, Sam," he greets her smoothly, "I can't believe they put you out here today."

"I know, I know," Samantha tuts, exaggerating each word and looking into the cabin, spotting me. "We must all do our bit, apparently. How are you, Emily, dear? I don't suppose you want to take over here?"

Samantha was one of the women who helped raise me, and although she was quite a tough nut, she's probably my favorite. Rather than seeing me as a nuisance for having nomagic, she just felt sorry for me, which stung a little more at times, but at least she was kind about it.

I still shake my head, though, intent on finding Marian before I lose my nerve to confide in anyone else about my baby. "Sorry, I've got to see—"

I'm interrupted by some shouting behind us on the trail, and Samantha immediately turns to peer around the truck. Ryan opens the door and steps out.

"Stay here," he tells me, suddenly much more serious. I can't help but think back to the last time we were in a truck together and the devastation at Samuel's village. Suddenly, this trip to the coven doesn't feel like such a good idea.

"Elenor? Is that you?" Samantha calls out to the figure of a woman in the distance who seems to be struggling to walk. Before she can answer, three large men appear from the tree line.

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“Call for backup, Sam. Now,” Ryan growls, and she runs back into the small cabin. Ryan turns around to face me. “Take the truck, get to the coven house, and ensure everyone is ready for an attack.”

I nod, climbing over to the driver’s side, but then I look up and see more rogues on the road in front. “Ryan,” I try to shout, but it comes out more like a whisper. “What do we do?”

Samantha leaves the cabin looking grim. “Marian is on her way; it’s going to be fine,” she says, looking directly at me and then back up the trail to where the men have grabbed the woman. “It’s definitely Elenor. She went out earlier, but I don’t know how they’ve got her. She must have opened one of the rune barriers.”

We both look toward the poor witch struggling in the rogue's grasp; now they’ve moved closer, and I see she’s covered in blood. She tries to shout something, but the shifter simply snaps her neck, and she falls to the ground. I gasp, tears springing to my eyes. Samantha’s expression immediately hardens, though; she grabs my hand and gives me a large baton. “This is infused with elemental magic,” she explains. “Hit them with it, and it will burn.”

I nod and stare at the simple baton, grateful for a weapon but knowing that, ultimately, it will be useless if I have to face shifters one-on-one. I offer Samantha a reassuring nod and try to look more confident than I feel. More growls emanate from the tree line, signaling that there is an unknown number of rogues waiting to attack. They must have decided to try and take out the witches and, therefore, the pack defenses. I hear Marian before I see her; the coven has wasted no time in mobilizing a defense, and it’s one anyone would think twice about going up against. The wind

whips up around the approaching witches, carrying them above the ground in a group of mini tornadoes that rattle the surrounding forest and send debris flying in their wake. The shifters on the road in front pause and look uncertainly at each other as Marian comes into focus, her eyes black and her long white hair flying around her as she screams an echo of her rage rattling around the forest.

A roar from behind almost drowns my fellow witches out as I turn to see Tristen's familiar black truck speeding toward us. The rogues on the trail with Elenor's body don't even have time to react as he plows into them, sending them crashing into the trees. He screeches to a stop, leaping from his truck, his eyes wild as he approaches.

I want to ask what he's doing here. Was he following us? But now isn't the time for questions or dealing with our problems. A battle cry sounds from the rogues hidden in the trees, and I know now is a time just to survive.

Chapter 13 - Tristen

As soon as Ryan messaged to say that Emily wanted to go to her coven, I knew I had to be there for that conversation. I need to know what Marian says about our child. My child.

Our baby will be a half-shifter, and I'm not letting the witches get their claws into them. I'm still not sure if that was Emily's plan all along. Part of me knows she can't really bewitch anyone; she doesn't have the magic, but I felt something in the forest that day, something unnaturally strong pulling me toward Emily. So, that doesn't mean Marian didn't help her. Perhaps it's all part of a bigger plan. Ralph always said the witches wanted to rule the island and couldn't be trusted.

I'm still fired up from my conversation with Callum this morning—sanctimonious bastard. I wasn't actually surprised that she went running to Ava. I know they're close. But I am surprised that Callum jumped on me so damn fast. Always the big

brother trying to lay down the law. But the fact is, I'm an alpha now, and I don't take kindly to him interfering. He overstepped this morning, and I damn well told him.

I get why he feels strongly about his mate. Ava's return was a blessing for him and our whole family. Harper is pretty much the only kid I've ever had time for, and now they have another one on the way. I get it. She's his mate, and he made a huge mistake when he was younger, rejecting her. He blames Ralph in a way, and I can see where he's coming from. Ralph ran a very different kind of pack, one where Ava wasn't particularly welcome. Callum thought he was a good alpha by rejecting her and putting the pack first. He was a fool, but that doesn't mean I'm wrong to be wary of the witches and Emily.

Maybe Ralph wasn't wrong about everything. He never had these problems with Malik or the rogues, and he didn't need to work with the witches, so he couldn't have been totally wrong.

Callum even had the nerve to suggest that instead of bewitching me, all Emily had done was reveal herself to be my mate. My sworn mate. He likened his wolf's feelings for Ava to mine for Emily—the need to be close to her that borders on obsession, the bond, the connection...I told him that was ridiculous, because why would my wolf be fated to mate with a witch and not another shifter, but he assured me it does happen.

I told him to mind his business and focus on his own family. He hung up, telling me not to blow up my own. And now I'm driving on the trail toward Marian's coven, still fuming but also confused as hell. I'm still pissed at Callum interfering. I'm not sure how well he'd have taken it if Aiden or I had involved ourselves in his business. But what he said about how his wolf's feelings for Ava mirror mine with Emily planted a seed of doubt that I can't seem to shake.

As I turn onto the steep incline that leads out to the coven, I'm lost in thought. Emily.

Our baby. The threat from Malik and our reliance on the witches' defenses. I rub my head, the weight of everything that weighs on me, threatening to give me a banging headache. I push it all away, focusing on the road ahead and what I hope to learn today. Perhaps I just need to ask Marian outright if it's true shifters and witches can be fated mates.

Am I ready for the answer? And what if we are? Will Emily forgive me for everything I've said to her—everything I've thought about her and accused her of?

A shiver runs through me at the thought of her, and I can't help but wonder if she's feeling it, too. Is that how it works?

The trees thin out as the road curves around, revealing the coven in front of me. There are several trucks and cars parked haphazardly on the side of the road, and my gut clenches. Something's not right. As I get closer, I see a witch lying dead on the road, surrounded by two rogues, and my blood runs cold. Then, I look up and see Emily on the trail ahead with Ryan and another witch at the checkpoint. More rogues are circling his truck, and my instincts kick in.

I slam my foot down on the accelerator, and the truck lurches forward, smashing through the rogue shifters who were blocking the road. They fly into the treeline, their bodies hitting hard against the bark and branches before they slump to the ground with a sickening thud. My eyes lock with Emily's as I skid to a stop in front of them. I jump from the truck and run around to where Emily is standing by the open door of Ryan's vehicle with the others.

"Are you okay?" I ask, but before she can reply, I hear the sound of Marian and her coven attacking the rogues closer to the coven. Emily's eyes go wide as Marian fires a volley of magic at a group of rogues, reducing them to ash.

"Glad she's on our side," Ryan mutters as we turn to face another group moving to

attack. Ryan and I shift simultaneously, our bodies twisting and contorting into our respective wolves. We charge together, letting our instincts take over. The fight is brutal, the adrenaline pumping through us as we tear into the rogues. They're no match for us, but they're not going down without a fight, either.

I can smell blood in the air as my teeth sink into the flesh of another rogue's shoulder, ripping it apart. He screams in pain as he staggers back, his body shifting back into human form, revealing a face contorted in agony until he dies in the dirt. I growl low in my throat before turning to face another rogue who lunges at me from behind, his claws raking into my fur as we roll onto the ground, but I manage to quickly pin him down with a swift blow to the side of his head, his neck snapping with a loud crack under my weight.

With that rogue dead, I turn to check on Emily and see her and the other witch. They're fighting off a rogue that has slipped through the trees, evading Marian's counterattack. Emily has some kind of electrified stick and is using it to repel her attacker. The other witch is trying to help some of her sisters stop the rogues from breaking through the tree line with some kind of spell.

Suddenly, I hear a shout from the rogues. "She's here. Grab the one with red hair."

My eyes immediately shoot back toward Emily, who looks terrified as several rogues descend on where she's still fighting. Completely overwhelmed, she calls out for Samatha, the other witch, who spins around and is immediately knocked out by a rogue who jumps out from the checkpoint cabin.

"Emily, get down," I yell as I spot a rogue lunge for her, and she ducks against the side of the truck, dragging the unconscious witch with her. Filled with rage at the thought of anyone hurting her or our baby, I summon all the magic within me, channeling it into a tornado that whips up the rogues, flinging them against rocks and trees in a rage. The wind howls as they struggle to escape my wrath, but there's no

escape. They're trapped in the maelstrom of my power.

Finally, when the rogues are lying defeated, the wind dies down, and I shift back into my human form, panting hard as I look for Emily. She's on the ground, holding onto the unconscious witch. "Are you okay?" I ask, rushing over to her side.

"I...I think so," she replies weakly as the witch stirs in her arms, blood covering her head.

I feel the bile rise in my throat at the thought of how close we came to her being taken, but I manage to keep it down as I pull her into my arms and stand up with her weight leaning against me. Ryan limps over with a bloody gash on his side from where a rogue's claws managed to catch him.

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"We need to get the witches out of here. The coven isn't safe, and the main house is burning," he says gruffly. I look over his shoulder and see the smoke rising in the distance. Marian has obviously summoned some water magic, but I'd say the damage is done.

I nod. "Have Marian round up her sisters. They can follow us down in their own vehicles." I pull out my phone and issue an alert for the patrols to gather at our location. "We'll get the border resecured."

Ryan nods and then grimly indicates up the trail. "It appears they forced that poor young witch into opening a rune checkpoint."

I let out a breath, knowing that it was good news they weren't able to break through on their own, but also knowing how hard the witches take losing one of their own. We've lost enough and know how it feels.

I keep Emily close, neither saying much while Marian and her sisters gather the wounded and their fallen witch. We help them into their trucks to follow us down the mountain. I thought for sure Marian would kick off when I suggested staying in town until the coven house is secure, but she surprised me by agreeing immediately. By the time we reach the town and settle the witches into the large hall with the help of the entire pack offering bedding and food, it's getting late. I have to practically drag Emily away as she takes charge of distributing items and helping some of the witches make dinner.

At one point, I find myself looking around as shifters and witches work together to turn the hall into a temporary living space. They work together and even laugh

despite the circumstances. Marian, usually so self-assured and formidable, seems different in her role as a leader today, softer with the younger witches who are in mourning and scared. She is defiant at moments when she talks of revenge, but altogether more of a true leader of her people than I've ever appreciated before.

And Emily, she's like a bridge between our worlds. Moving through the hall, directing people and answering questions, offering advice, and remaining completely calm despite all she's been through today. Almost like a true...luna.

I finally pull Emily from the hall as the sun sets, exhaustion written all over her features. We drive the short distance to the house in silence, entering the house and standing in the entrance hall, almost at a loss as to what to do next, our argument hanging between us, painfully unspoken.

"Well," Emily says quietly, "I should get some sleep."

She turns as if to go to her room, and I instinctively reach for her hand and pull her back. "I can't be away from you tonight," I tell her plainly. "I need you."

She eyes me for a moment, and I'm genuinely not sure what I'll do, what my wolf will do if she says no. Thankfully, she nods and allows me to lead her through the house to my room. It's dark when we enter, and she disappears into the en-suite. I'm weary as I strip off my clothes, discarding them in the basket as I wait for her to emerge.

When she does, she's wearing one of my oversized t-shirts from the back of the en-suite door, her arms and legs still showing the marks of the earlier battle, covered in scrapes and bruises. My wolf paces restlessly within me, needing to be close to her, feel her near me, and reassure myself she's safe. That our baby is safe. As she climbs onto the bed and lies down on her side, facing away from me, I crawl in behind her and wrap my arms around her waist.

She stiffens for a moment before relaxing into my embrace. It's not what I want, but it's a start. Instead of pouncing on her like my wolf wants to, I lie there with her, holding on to her as if she's the only thing keeping me sane in our world gone mad. It's when I hear the sound of her gently sniffing, realizing she's crying, that I can't take it anymore. I gently roll her over, cupping her face as I wipe the tears away with my thumb, painfully aware that my calloused hands need to be gentle on her far softer skin.

"I'm sorry," I say, struggling to find the words. "For everything. For not being there sooner. For not being a better man. I—"

She takes me by complete surprise when she cuts me off with a kiss. It's a gentle kiss that cuts right through my words to the emotions that lie underneath, saying more than I ever could. As her lips part under mine and the kiss deepens, I taste the saltiness of her tears mixed with her natural sweetness. Her fingers twist in my hair as she deepens the kiss, and suddenly, I'm lost in her.

I trail my hand down her side, over the soft skin of her stomach, where our baby grows. She shivers slightly at the touch, and I smile against her lips before dipping further down to trace patterns on her thighs with my fingers. She's mine, and I need to mark her as such and prove it to both of us.

My hand moves between her legs, pushing the shirt up and over her head, revealing her body to me in the half-light. My cock jerks at the sight of her ready for me, aching for release. With one swift move, I slide my hand underneath her panties and press two fingers into her pussy, feeling the heat and wetness surround them as she gasps against my mouth.

Her hips buck against my hand as I begin to finger fuck her with long, deep strokes, the sound of her pleasure filling the room. My other hand slides up her naked body, teasing a nipple until it stands erect before taking it into my mouth. She arches

against me at the dual sensation, and it's too much for me to take any longer.

I nudge her legs apart and position myself between them before slowly pushing into her tight heat. She gasps at the intrusion but meets my thrusts, as eager for me as I am for her. My voice is raw as I whisper, "mine," against her skin, feeling the claiming of her body and soul as I begin to move.

Her nails dig into my shoulders as she finds her rhythm with me, matching each forceful thrust with a moan of pleasure. Our lovemaking after such a brutal day is primal and messy, but it's what we both need. To feel alive and connected in a world that appears to want us dead or apart. And when she comes, screaming my name, it's the most beautiful thing I've ever heard and all the confirmation that my wolf needs. She is mine, bewitchment or not.

But just because she wants me tonight, does that mean she's forgiven me?

Chapter 14 - Emily

My stomach roils as the bile rises in my throat, and I barely make it to the bowl before I dry heave. I didn't expect the nausea to kick in so fast, though I'm not sure what I expected at all, given that I've never been pregnant before.

The smell of breakfast being cooked down the hall filters through, but the thought of food turns my stomach even more, and all I can do is try to breathe through the waves of discomfort. The room spins as I lean against the bathroom counter, my knuckles white against the cold surface as I wash my mouth out and clean my face.

I hear Tristen approaching through the haze, his footsteps soft on the hardwood floor. He slides an arm around my waist and leads me toward the couch in the living room. He grabs a damp cloth from a basket near the fireplace and gently wipes my forehead and cheeks, coolness soothing my flushed skin. "Drink this," he says, pressing a cup

of water into my hands.

I gratefully gulp down the cool liquid, sitting up straighter in relief when it doesn't come straight back up again. "Thanks." My voice is hoarse, but at least it doesn't sound like death anymore.

"You need to eat something," he insists, his worry etched deep in his brows. "You haven't eaten since yesterday." His fingers brush through his dark hair in frustration as he looks at me, like, really looks at me, for the first time this morning, his eyes filled with concern. I must really look in a complete state.

"I'll try," I manage, knowing it is important even though my stomach still churns at the thought. But as he turns and heads back to the kitchen, I can already feel the nausea starting to creep back in again.

He must sense it, because he returns quickly with a simple plate of toast, setting it on the coffee table in front of me with another glass of water. "Let's just start with something simple, okay?" he says as I eye up the food cautiously.

The smell makes my eyes water, but I force myself to take a bite of the toast. It's still warm, and the butter melts against my tongue. Tristen watches me carefully as I pick at the food, his expression unreadable.

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"Are you okay?" I ask between mouthfuls, shifting uncomfortably under his scrutiny. He doesn't answer right away; he just nods slowly and sits down next to me on the couch, our shoulders almost touching. We sit in silence for a few minutes, probably both just as lost in our thoughts as we try to process our situation.

Finally, Tristen breaks the silence. "Why do you think they targeted you?" he asks, leveling his gaze on me.

I flinch at the question, not sure if I'm even ready to face that truth yet. But he deserves an answer.

"I don't know," I admit softly, looking down at my hands, still clutching some of the toast. "Maybe because of me being part of the coven...maybe because I'm the luna. Maybe they thought I was valuable somehow."

He thinks for a moment and then shakes his head. "There's more to it than that," he sighs, clearly frustrated. "I've asked around. They were specifically targeting you, just like at Samuel's village. You must know something about why?"

My eyes snap to his, and my heart sinks. "I'm not keeping anything from you, Tristen. I don't know why," I say quietly. Does he think I'm constantly keeping secrets or telling him lies?

He seems to realize what he's said and groans, "No, no," he says, "I didn't mean you were. I'm just trying to figure this out. I need to know to keep you safe—to keep you both safe."

Us both safe. I look up and nod, meeting his gaze as we both stare at each other for a moment. We've barely had time to process the news about the pregnancy or what it means for us. And I never got to ask Marian anything about it.

"I, uh, I should talk to Marian," I say. "About the baby. I don't even know what to expect."

Tristen nods thoughtfully, "That's not a bad idea. I have to go out to the coven house with Ryan and the others and check the temporary defenses, but I can meet you at the hall later. We can talk to Marian together?"

I nod, swallowing the last of my toast. "Sure," I say, surprised to hear him even offer to talk to Marian willingly. We may have shared a bed last night; our need to be together was undeniable. But we haven't talked about the future or what this baby will mean for us. I know he regrets our argument, and in the face of what happened yesterday, I don't even have it in me to rehash it right now.

Just as I think he's about to say more, there's a knock at the door, and I notice Ryan and a couple of the other betas waiting outside. Tristen looks torn for a moment, as though he doesn't really want to go, and for the first time, I notice how weary he looks. Ava has mentioned the toll that Malik's attacks and the overall responsibilities for his pack are taking on Callum. I've never really considered how Tristen is handling any of this. He always seems so self-assured.

"Do you want a ride to the hall?" he asks as we both look down at my crumpled and stained clothes from this morning's sickness.

I chuckle, "No, thank you. I definitely need to change first." I look up and realize he's still looking uncertain. "I'll be fine. I'm safe here."

"Mmm," he says quietly, "I wish that felt more true."

I nod, biting my lip and knowing exactly what he means. Nowhere really feels safe anymore, does it?

I stand when he does, giving Ryan a small wave through the glass door. He flashes me a wide-open, disarming smile; his enthusiasm and laid-back nature never fail to surprise me when I consider how hard he's had to fight too recently, and how he's defended me not once, but twice. Tristen turns to say something to me, but the words seem to die in his throat as he shifts awkwardly before kissing me on the cheek and walking away. I don't miss the ribbing he gets from Ryan for the slight display of public affection he just gave me, and it makes me smile even though I have absolutely no idea what it means.

I quickly change into a comfortable pair of leggings, a long-sleeved top, and some boots before grabbing my bag and heading out the front door. The air is cool and crisp as I make my way down the tree-lined road toward the town square, my mind already racing with everything that needs to be done today. The local bakery is just ahead; it's usually enticing, warm, and sweet, and the smell wafts onto the street as I push the door open. However, today it almost turns my stomach, but I'm determined to pick up some food for the coven before going to the hall.

"Morning, Luna," the girl behind the counter greets me softly before her face drops with concern at my apparent sickness. "You okay?"

I force a smile. "Yeah, I'm fine. I'm just feeling under the weather." It's not entirely a lie.

The girl smiles and takes my order quickly. Glancing around, I notice how quiet it is; the usually bustling town square is unusually somber. The girl hands me one of the bags and notices me looking around. "It feels weird, doesn't it?" she says, almost in a whisper. "I don't think folk know what to do anymore; it's like we might be attacked any second."

I nod grimly. “Tristen has it under control, and I know that the coven is working on new defenses right now,” I reassure her. “What’s your name?”

The girl’s face lights up. “Charlotte, Luna,” she smiles.

I chuckle. “Please, call me Emily.”

Charlotte nods. “I feel so sad for the coven. That old house is beautiful. I hope it can be repaired,” she says, and her words really touch me. So often, it feels as though the shifters and witches will never get along. “I’ve put in a few extra buns for them.”

I thank her, and when I try to pay, she waves the money away, telling me the sugar rush from the sweet buns will help them work even quicker on the new defenses. Laughing, I thank her and leave feeling lighter than I did. The conversation with Charlotte also temporarily distracted me from my sickness, which was nice, but it returns in full force by the time I reach the hall.

Samantha sees me coming and immediately rushes forward, “Are you okay, Emily?” she says, taking the bags from me despite the bandages covering one side of her head where she was hit by the rogue.

I try to brush her off, but she insists. “I’m fine, honestly.”

Samantha stares at me for a moment, considering something before cracking into a mischievous grin. “Oh, I see.” She giggles. “I recognize this particular green hue. Is there anything you want to tell me?”

I roll my eyes and decide I can’t get anything past my coven. I’m actually surprised the healer hasn’t already blabbed to everyone. Witches are not known for their discretion. “Okay, fine, I’m not sick, it’s morning sickness, I guess.”

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Samantha claps her hands together and pulls me in for a rare hug; I find myself almost sinking in before she continues, “At least with Tristen’s genes carrying magic, too, there’s a chance this baby may bring a gift back to your line. How fortunate,” she cackles.

The thing is, I know she doesn’t even mean to upset me. Samantha probably cares about me more than most in the coven, but magic will always come first. Everyone thinks shifters are the worst for prioritizing strength over almost anything else, but witches are just as bad when it comes to magic. I smile as she continues to gush about the baby and push down my familiar feelings of inadequacy as some of my other sisters gather around, handing out the sweet buns and echoing the same sentiments about my pregnancy. The relief in the room is palpable, and my child may signal a return to the magic I have failed to deliver.

By the time I corner Marian, it’s mid-afternoon, and I feel more vulnerable than I should to face her. She’s formidable at the best of times; after the attack yesterday, she appears to be firing on all cylinders, a veritable whirlwind at the back of the hall, overseeing a war chest of potential defenses.

She is clearly pissed.

I draw closer, debating whether or not to talk to her today, when she catches my eye. “Emily,” she calls over, her white hair looking wilder than usual. “I hear congratulations are in order.”

“You heard?” I reply, walking over.

“I knew,” she replies cryptically. “That’s why you were coming yesterday, no?”

I stare at her for a moment, unsure if she really is prophetic or just extremely well-attuned to coven gossip. Both, perhaps.

“Sort of,” I say carefully. “I wanted to know what a half-witch shifter child will be like.”

Marian cackles—a proper, all-out cackle that draws stares from around the room. “Wild. Your child will be absolutely wild. And powerful.”

“Even with me as its mother?” I say, the words of my coven ringing fresh in my ears.

Marian hesitates for a moment. It’s gone in a flash, but I saw it. And it’s something I’ve never seen her do before. “We should talk, walk with me,” she says, and immediately turns, grabbing a sweet bun before heading out of the hall.

I trail after her, wondering what she’d need to say to me away from the others. Covens are not known for their personal space, gossip is rife, and the concept of secrets barely exists. So, I follow her into the crisp sunlight, intrigued. We stop at one of the benches outside the hall, and Marian eats the sweet bun, seemingly unconcerned that I’m standing waiting.

“At least the wolves can bake,” she finally says, finishing the last of the bun.

“Er, yes, it’s from Charlotte’s bakery,” I reply, unsure what else to say.

“Ah, yes, I’ve always liked Charlotte’s family. Good shifters,” she says thoughtfully.

“You know Charlotte?” I ask, almost surprised, given that I didn’t think Marian had much time for shifters.

“I know everyone, Emily,” she says, sighing. “I have something to say, and I think it may be challenging for you to hear. But I want you to remember that your mother loved you very much.”

“Okay,” I say slowly, not liking where this is going. We never talk about my mother; she died in the days after my birth, and everyone mourned her. She was one of the most powerful witches in the coven, and her death completely blindsided everyone, apparently.

“Your father was from the mainland, but that’s all we know, other than that Sarah was crazy about him.” Sarah. My mother. Marian continues, and I can see this is difficult for her. “He disappeared. She was heartbroken, but we figured she’d move on. Then we found out you were on the way; she was so excited. But the pregnancy wasn’t normal. The magic around her was uncontrollable. We hunted everywhere for clues and spoke to covens on the mainland. The magic was going to kill her. We bound her magic—your magic, too. But it didn’t save her.”

I’m too shocked to respond, suddenly feeling lightheaded; I feel Marian’s hands on me, guiding me to sit on the bench too. “Did I kill her?” I murmur, thinking out loud.

“No, child,” she says, surprisingly gentle for once. “You were born, and she was so happy. She didn’t even care about having no magic. She just wanted you. I sat with her those first days and saw her love for you.”

“So what happened? Why did she die?” I ask, confused.

I’m shocked as tears well in Marian’s eyes. She dabs them, looking away. “We—I—thought it would be safe to unbind her magic, but she was too weak, and your father’s magic was obviously still there; she began burning up. There was nothing we could do.” Marian sighs and then looks at me, her stoicism back. “It is my fault.”

I shake my head. “No, I don’t think she’d want you to think that,” I say, shocking myself as I reach over to take her hand. “But why did my father’s magic do this?”

Marian releases a long breath. “We really don’t know much, but the magic I saw surrounding your mother when she was pregnant was unlike anything I’d seen before until...”

“Until what?” I ask, my blood suddenly running cold as my hand flies to my stomach.

“Until I witnessed Malik’s magic,” she replies quietly.

The whole world tilts on its axis. “Malik is my father?” I gasp.

“Goodness, no,” Marian replies, laughing despite the circumstances. “I met your father; he was very attractive. Your mother had taste, albeit for dangerous choices. But the type of magic reminds me of what your mother couldn’t control. It overwhelmed her. It wasn’t like our magic.”

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The reality of the situation slowly unravels in my mind, and I realize I'm still gripping Marian's hand. "Would I have that magic if it hadn't been bound?" I ask, grappling with the notion that I'm finally understanding why I'm the only witch who didn't have any practical magic all these years.

Marian nods. "I believe so. Along with your mother's magic, I believe you would be very powerful. If you could control it," she says before squeezing my hand.

"Why are you telling me this now?" I ask suddenly.

She looks at my stomach. "Your child," she says simply. "I don't know what might happen to your bound powers during a pregnancy. And Malik seems to find you particularly interesting, which should concern everyone."

Looking up, I see Tristen's truck arriving. How do I tell him any of this when he barely trusts witches as it is? For the first time, I really feel my mother's absence, and as I look at Marian, someone I've always feared and admired, I realize she feels exactly the same.

Chapter 15 - Tristen

I punch the bag, taking swings in rapid succession and completely ignoring the grunts from Aiden, who's trying to hold it steady. With another final volley, Aiden pushes it back at me, so it swings wildly.

"What the fuck, man," he snaps. "Just chill, would you."

I roll my eyes. “It’s not like I’m punching you; you just had to hold the damn bag,” I growl, walking off to find some water.

“Right,” I hear Aiden mutter and turn to say something to Ryan, who’s been standing to the side, watching. He’s probably just grateful Aiden brought some of his betas over for a group training exercise and has been sparring with me instead of him. I know I’m in a foul mood.

Who wouldn’t be in my position?

I had a suspicion that any conversation with Marian wouldn’t be plain sailing, but I did not expect the barrage of information that awaited me when I arrived at the coven. I could tell Emily was genuinely only finding it out at the same time, because she looked as shell-shocked as I felt.

I had wondered if our child would be more shifter than a witch, given that Emily has no practical magic. Now I find out that Emily has no power because her magic was bound before she was born, and she actually may be incredibly powerful. And no one knows what any of this means for our child.

And to top it all off, Marian has been lying to us this whole time. Pretending that Malik’s powers are a complete enigma when, in reality, she’s not only met someone with similar powers, but he’s also Emily’s father. I asked the inevitable question—is Malik himself her father? But Marian shot me down with such venom that I thought she was going to make me spontaneously combust. It appears she was closer to Emily’s mother than I realized.

Maybe more than Emily realized, judging by her reaction to all this. The fact remains, though, that Malik’s type of magic has been seen before, and Emily probably carries it within her.

Which means our baby is now wrapped up in this chaos.

My wolf was so enraged I could have easily blown up at Marian there and then, but the alpha and man in me knew I had to contain the situation. I've got too much at stake now.

I know I need to discuss it with my brothers. They have a right to know about Marian's revelations. But with Callum not wanting to leave Ava so close to giving birth, and Aiden arriving mid-training, I haven't had a chance to find the right words. I don't even know what the right words might be. Emily and I have barely spoken about it. I drove her home after talking with Marian, and things felt tense; I held her all night, but it still felt as though there was a wall between us. Like we didn't want to talk about it in case things blew up between us again. Everything feels too fragile, with so much at risk.

I take a swig of water, and Aiden comes up to me, dabbing his brow with one of the towels. "Tristen, man, you alright?" he asks, and I give him a curt nod. "I mean, we all get it's been shitty lately, but that's no reason to take it out on the bag."

He smirks as he takes the water bottle from my hand and takes a drink, and I resist the urge to smack it out of his hand. We've always wound each other up, but I have a feeling my wolf is so on edge I wouldn't be able to hold back today. So I curl my hand tightly around the bottle I'm holding and focus on not retaliating. I know I need to get some of this out in the open; my brothers deserve to know what's going on, too.

I sigh, tossing the empty bottle into the trash. "Emily's pregnant," I say, and wait a beat for his response.

I don't have to wait long. His face is a picture. "Well, damn," he laughs. "And there's me thinking you wouldn't touch a witch. Turns out that isn't a problem when they

look as sexy as tha—”

I growl, reaching out my fist to grab his shirt. “You dare finish that sentence.”

My brother merely chuckles as my wolf rages before realizing I’ve simply risen to his bait.

“Fuck you,” I snap.

Aiden raises his hands, “Okay, sorry. I wasn’t just testing your wolf. Seems like you’ve got it bad,” he says, his voice slightly more sincere. “Well, this is great news, I guess. Have you told Callum and Ava?”

I shake my head, knowing I need to fill him in on the rest. He obviously picks up on my hesitation. “What’s going on, Tris?” he asks, all humor leaving his voice. “You’re not happy about it?”

“I don’t know how I feel about it,” I reply. “I mean, happy about a pup. I never really thought about it, but I am. And Em...I can’t get enough, but she’s a witch and...”

“And you have beef with witches because Ralph told you to feel that way,” Aiden butts in, and I glare at him, but he simply laughs and leans against the cabin wall. “Tell me I’m wrong?”

I refuse to give him an inch more. “There are many valid reasons not to trust witches,” I growl, not wanting to go down that route. “But that’s not the issue. Not the main issue, anyway.”

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“Okay, what’s the issue, then?” Aiden sighs.

I let out a breath, the weight of the last twenty-four hours suddenly feeling immense.

“We spoke to Marian, and Emily found out some stuff...”

I fill him in on our conversation with Marian, from the details about Emily’s mom to the little we know about her father, his powers, and how it all relates to Malik’s own magic. Aiden’s face goes from passive to intrigued to finally horrified.

“Are you saying your baby might possess the same kind of magic Malik does? That shapeshifting shit?” Aiden finally asks, stunned.

“For fuck’s sake, Aiden,” I mutter, and he cringes.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean it was a bad thing,” he soothes. “I’m just in shock here. We’ve all been assuming Malik was some kind of one-off. You’d think Marian might have mentioned this before.”

I nod. “Her loyalties are with the witches. I think she was trying to protect Emily or maybe her mom’s secret. Seems like they were friends.”

“And what about Emily?” Aiden asks. “Does she have this power? Is it still bound?”

I shrug, genuinely not knowing the answer. Does Emily have no magic, or is she one of the most powerful witches on the island? “We don’t know. Marian says they could try unbinding her, but she’s reluctant. It seems that’s what killed her mom.”

Aiden's eyes go wide. "Fuck, man," he says, running a hand over his face.

We both fall silent for a moment until his phone rings. He glances down at it and wanders away to talk to whoever it is while I grab another bottle of water. The training is almost wrapping up for the day, with our betas using some new runes provided by the witches to supercharge our fighting abilities. Part of me wants to be pissed at Marian, but I know she's trying, and I understand loyalty all too well myself.

"Tristen," Aiden calls out, running back over, "you gotta hear this."

He comes striding back over, holding the phone aloft and indicating it's on speaker. "Byron, tell him what you just told me."

I listen as one of Aiden's most trusted betas, who's currently on patrol along our border, comes on the line. "Sure thing, Alpha," he replies, clearing his throat. "We were trailing a couple of rogues along the ridge. Think they were out scouting; they don't seem local. Mainland, I think. To be honest, we were about to take them out when I heard them mention a bounty."

A bounty?

"On who?" I ask, even though I suspect I already know the answer deep down.

"They said Malik wants the special red-haired witch," Byron says, confirming my worst fears. "Sorry, Tristen. But Aiden mentioned she'd been targeted before."

I close my eyes to quell the banging headache, threatening to descend as my wolf begins to stir, agitated beyond belief. I turn, rubbing my hand across my stubble to ground me.

“Tell him the rest,” Aiden tells Byron grimly.

“There’s more?” I growl, and Aiden nods solemnly.

Byron sighs before continuing, “One of them asked if they’d get more if the witch is really pregnant. Two for one.”

For once, I feel completely speechless. Instead, my wolf does the talking. With my claws extended, I turn and punch the cabin wall, the wood giving way to a shower of splinters under my clawed fist. I dimly hear Aiden hanging up the call, and I feel his presence behind me, waiting to calm down. Eventually, I turn around to face him. “I need to speak to those rogues.”

Aiden shakes his head. “They refused to be taken alive; Byron had no choice.”

Cursing, I grab my keys. “I need to see Emily. Double security.”

“Good idea,” Aiden agrees, walking with me toward my truck. “You know, if Malik is that desperate to get her, bringing in mercenaries and a bounty, it means something. We’re not getting anywhere in tracking him down, just fending off attacks. Maybe she’s the key to all this.”

“She has no powers, Aiden. She’s completely vulnerable,” I snap.

Aiden stands by as I start the engine.

“Seems like she might, though,” he says as I pull away. I pretend not to hear him, but his words echo in my mind all the way back into town. For Malik to recognize her power, it must still be there. And how the hell does he know she’s pregnant?

I’m still mulling over those questions as I pull up to the house. Pausing as I take the

steps toward the door, it becomes apparent I have visitors. So I'm not surprised when I open the door and immediately spot several familiar-looking witches gathered in my kitchen, the smell of potions hitting my sensitive senses like a slap to the face.

The funny thing is, this is what I assumed it would be like when Emily became my luna—a house full of witches and the constant aura of magic. I didn't count on her distant position within the coven. Now, I strongly suspect Marian did that on purpose, perhaps out of guilt or to keep her potential type of magic a secret. But with a bounty on her head and Malik hunting her down, that's clearly not going to work.

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As I stride into the kitchen, I catch snippets of conversation between the witches. They talk in hushed tones, casting nonchalant glances my way before returning to their mixing bowls and ingredients. I clear my throat, and they all turn in unison, completely unbothered by my presence.

I raise an eyebrow at the mess in my kitchen. “What’s going on here?” I ask warily.

A witch with long, black hair steps forward. “We’re just...mixing potions for Emily,” she says quickly, gesturing to the back patio. “She’s outside.”

I nod, deciding not to say more to the witches currently trashing my kitchen, before heading out to find her. The sun is still shining, and Emily is standing underneath a tree with Marian, deep in conversation. Her hair is blowing in the wind, and she looks so radiant that it almost takes my breath away for a moment.

I know I need to tell her about Malik, so I let out a breath and walk towards them. They both seem to spot me at the same moment, Marian turning to look at me with the same aloof expression as usual, but unless I’m mistaken, there’s a note of mutual understanding there now that feels new.

“Tristen,” Emily says, her face lighting up as I approach, “I’m glad you’re here.”

Marian can’t help rolling her eyes at that. “Yes, apparently, we need to talk to you first,” she says dramatically.

Emily glares at Marian, which surprises me. “I...we...have been talking about unbinding my powers,” she tells me. “I-I can’t be vulnerable, and my powers might

help us defeat Malik. If we understood what they are.”

I’m not sure what she’s expecting me to say, but she looks concerned. Marian simply studies me, waiting for my reaction. I let out a long breath. “We just received word that Malik knows about the baby and is actively hunting you,” I tell her, hating the way her eyes go wide with fear, and her hand immediately flies to her stomach as if to protect our child. “If unbinding your powers will keep you safe, then it might be worth a shot.”

Marian nods. “I told you wolves can be reasonable when they try,” she says dryly, which I ignore.

“But what about the baby?” I ask. “Will Emily and the baby be safe?”

I notice Marian’s demeanor shift slightly, looking more humble as she nods. “I believe we have more resources at our disposal than when we dealt with this issue before,” she says carefully. “Plus, Emily already carries this magic within her, whereas her mother did not. And the child, too, as well as being a shifter—I believe they are already designed to survive it.”

“And if you’re wrong?” I ask, my blood running cold.

Marian looks directly at me, the power in her eyes flashing silver to emerald in defiance of my question. “I won’t lose them,” she says finally. “I promised her mother I would keep her safe, and I will not fail.”

I look at Emily and see the certainty in her eyes; in my head, I know she’s right. But my heart is just filled with fear. The thought of losing either of them suddenly feels crushing. But the knowledge that Malik could find a way to break through our defenses again and attack at any moment is all too real.

I have no choice—for once, I have to trust the witches.

Chapter 16 - Emily

I bite back a silent scream of frustration as the tiny spark I swear I just saw on my fingertip dies before anyone else can see it. I glance around, but Marian is deep in conversation with Samantha and Merrick, one of the younger witches, who at least gives me a sympathetic smile.

I've been at this for two days now, with Marian trying to gradually unbind my powers rather than all at once. Apparently, it's never been done before, but if anyone can do it, Marian can. But even I can see the strain it's putting on her—the bags under her eyes and her usually luminescent skin have taken on a worrying gray hue. She also looks smaller somehow, which is disconcerting.

Looking down at my hands, I notice the tremor is back. Every time I push myself, the tremors follow. I guess Marian isn't the only one showing signs of struggle. She seems to sense my thoughts and finally looks up, her face a perfect mask of serenity despite the frustration that is engulfing us all.

Waving the others off, she walks over to where I'm standing under the giant cedar, hoping that its substantial canopy will somehow guard the little sparks against being blown out by the breeze that flows around the meadow. Ironically, we decided to travel along the coastline to this meadow because Marian was concerned about unleashing my powers around too many bystanders. So far, the unleashing has elicited about five random sparks. Not exactly fearsome.

“This isn't working,” I say, trying to keep my voice steady even though my emotions are all over the place. I glance over at Ryan and the rest of the betas who Tristen has stationed around the meadow to protect us, feeling like I'm wasting everyone's time.

“That’s not entirely true,” Marian sighs. “Yesterday, there were no signs. Today there are...some.”

“Can we try to lift more of the binding magic now?” I ask, knowing that she’s worried about the repercussions, but there have been none so far. With Malik hunting me and the fear he knows about my pregnancy, I’m more than ready to have the means to defend myself and my unborn child.

Marian nods with understanding, “I know you’re frustrated, but I’m trying to keep you safe,” she tells me again. “Besides, we tried an hour ago, and I could feel the resistance coming from within you. You know, it’s not a case of doing the incantation, click my fingers, and suddenly, you have all the power. You need to welcome the power. At the moment, you’re pushing it away.”

I scoff for a moment before remembering who I’m talking to, taking in her raised brows and the flash in her eyes. I offer her a tentative smile as an apology. “I’m not trying to push it away,” I say quietly, “I want this. Why would I push it away when this power could fight Malik or at least help us understand him better?”

Marian chuckles before sitting on one of the tree’s enormous roots. “I’d say there were a few very obvious reasons,” she replies. “This power took your mother. You’re pregnant, and all women are risk-averse when pregnant. You have a stubborn shifter mate who has a problem with witches...I think you’re about to dwarf his magic. You know it, and so does he.”

I sink down next to her, feeling like she’s just peeled back my soul and read my mind. “I don’t think...”

“Of course you don’t,” she interrupts me. “You’re not used to thinking of yourself as powerful. Now, you have to own up to the fact that you are a force to be reckoned with, and once we unleash that part of you, there is no going back. That scares you.

Perhaps it should.”

I blow out the breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding as I consider her words. Tristen has actually been surprisingly supportive, more so than I ever would have imagined. When I see him, that is. Malik's rogues are attacking the borders and even the ships coming from the mainland; thank goodness Tristen has an alliance with Nolan, the other pack alpha, so they can work together. Everyone is on edge, with stories of Malik shapeshifting into a sea monster to attack the coast...is that even possible?

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Tristen is out with multiple patrols day and night. When he finally returns to the house, I'm already in bed, and he slips beneath the covers, pulling me close. I let him take what he needs, and in return, he gives me everything I need. Except for the words, I think deep down, I want to hear: that we are in this together. That he won't reject me or our child. That he'll love and protect us.

Finding out I'm pregnant and learning more about my parents has made me think about my own childhood with a fresh perspective. I think I understand better why Marian kept me close but not too close. And why I felt the older witches viewed me with tentative compassion, but equally preferred to let the younger witches raise me. They both grieved my mother and feared the magic they knew resided within me. Even Samantha spoke to me about my mother yesterday and how they used to play in this very meadow when they were young—I never even realized they had been close, so concrete was the wall of silence, the elders all complicit in keeping the fact that my magic had been bound a secret. Even Samantha hadn't realized the link between my father's magic and Malik's, though. Everyone is reeling from that.

All magic is elemental, even Tristen's family gift. But Malik appears to be able to steal power from other magical beings, absorb them, and grow stronger...that is unheard of. Part of me hopes I can't do that. I don't want to be thought of like Malik. Marian said that my mother was in awe of my father's powers but very secretive about him. She mentioned that he seemed to have the power of all the supernatural species and could almost pick and choose which to use.

I shudder, thinking about Malik with that kind of power.

"Emily," Marian's voice brings me back to the present. "We're going to need to try

again if you're ready."

I look over to where everyone is waiting for me. It feels strange to be the center of attention in my own coven when I have spent my whole life living on the edge, trying to blend into the background and help everyone else with their magic. And now they're all looking at me like I'm some kind of project—an experiment. Something to be studied and gawked at.

We walk over to where they are all waiting, and I take a deep breath, closing my eyes as Marian begins the incantation. The wind instantly picks up, whipping around me, and light begins to spill from my fingertips as I struggle against the invisible binding. It's beautiful and terrifying all at once. I feel like I'm being pulled in a million directions as the power surges through me, threatening to overwhelm me. Suddenly, there is a crack of thunder above us, and the entire meadow shakes.

I scream as pain sears through me, my muscles clenching so tightly that I can feel my bones groaning in protest. The ground beneath me rumbles, sending vibrations up through my body. I fall to my knees as I hear someone shouting my name frantically.

I look up, tears in my eyes, to see Tristen pushing witches out of the way. His expression is one of raw panic as he reaches me. I don't even know when he arrived or how much time has passed, but his touch is cool on my skin and grounds me.

"I'm here," he whispers against my ear. "Breathe."

It takes a moment, but I do as he says, focusing on him and the calming effect of his presence. The darkness around us begins to lift, almost as if the sun dares to reappear behind the turbulent clouds above.

"T-the baby," I sob against his shoulder. "Is my baby okay?"

The pain was so terrifying, my only thought is for my baby as Marian and the healer rush over. The healer has to coax Tristen into letting go of me for just a moment to hold her hands over my stomach, as I've seen her do so many times for mothers. She's checking to see if my baby is alive. Seconds feel like an eternity until she nods, smiling. "The little one is fine," she soothes. "Sometimes our pain is not their pain. Especially true with this one; I can already sense the shifter strength."

I look at Tristen and don't miss the smile that crosses his face at the mention of his baby having shifter strength. "That's my boy," he grins, pulling me close again. "Or girl, obviously."

Marian clears her throat, looking between us. "I think it's time we get you back to the house. That is quite enough for today," she says, looking over at the uprooted trees and the cracks in the earth that I didn't even notice before.

I nod, feeling like my bones have been turned into jelly, as Tristen scoops me up into his arms like I weigh nothing at all. I'm used to him being strong, but today, it feels different. More protective.

We get into his truck in silence, both of us trying to catch our breath. I lean against the cold window as he starts the engine. "I'm glad I arrived when I did," he says quietly. "I've never seen anything like that. It was like a funnel of light sucking in all the daylight. The sky was black. Your scream...do you think the magic is unbound?"

I shrug, concentrating on my body and trying to figure out if I feel any different. "Lighter," I whisper. "I do feel something, but I can't explain it."

I rest my hand on my stomach, overwhelmed. Looking at Tristen's disheveled hair and concerned-filled face, I'd say he feels exactly the same. All I want is to get home and shut the whole world out for a moment so I can think. Maybe I will figure out if the unbinding really has worked this time without everyone's eyes on me.

We pull out of the meadow and onto the old coastal road in silence, both lost in thought. I look out to sea as it appears on my left over the sand dunes. Suddenly, I notice shapes moving fast along the shoreline, and my heart drops.

“Tristen?” I say, grabbing his arm. “Look.”

A group of rogues appears further along the road, soaking wet as they’ve clearly emerged from the sea. Did they swim in from a boat or around the coastline to avoid the runes? My heart hammers in my chest as more appear scattered along the dunes. Some have shifted, but their wolves appear much larger than usual, with eyes glowing so green that I can see them from here.

Tristen stops the truck and jumps out, yelling something at Ryan before reappearing at the door. “Stay in here, lock the door, and if you can, break through and drive straight back to town; I’ll clear a path.”

I shake my head; the thought of simply driving away and leaving him to deal with these monsters is completely unthinkable. “I’m not leaving you.”

“Goddamit, Emily,” he glares, “you’re vulnerable. These are shifters.”

“They look like a lot more than just shifters to me,” I say, the horror clear in my voice as I look out and see more of the glowing eyes approaching. Ryan and some of the betas have already shifted, but their wolves look noticeably smaller in comparison.

I nod as Tristen shuts the door without another word, but I have absolutely no intention of just leaving Tristen or my coven. I notice Marian rounding the trucks. Whatever weakness or tiredness I noted earlier is gone, replaced by her usual imposing appearance. Her white hair flows around her as her feet hover above the ground. When she looks in my direction, the silver in her eyes is more blinding than ever.

Marian wastes no time firing on the rogues. Her silver magic showers them with fire along the dunes, causing some to retreat in agony while others break through, attacking Tristen's defensive line. I immediately see Ryan go down and scream from the truck, grateful when I see him dragged back by some of the betas, one of whom isn't so lucky as I see a rogue tear into his flesh and fling him into the dunes. I gasp as his blood begins to soak the white sand, and he doesn't get back up.

I can't just sit here. I ball my fists, the fear and anger threatening to overwhelm me as I see two of the massive rogues advancing on Tristen. Looking down at my hands, I see they've started to glow and feel as though they're burning. I jump from the truck and run toward the sand dunes without thinking.

The rogues notice me and howl, their combined voices sending chills down my spine. I raise my arms, trying to summon the power I know now lurks within my grasp, but struggling against the fear that grips me.

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Suddenly, Marian is beside me. She grabs my hand and squeezes tightly. “Now,” she whispers. “Now, Emily.”

And just like that, the dam breaks. The power I’ve been pushing down for so long erupts from me in a wave, washing over everything in its path. The ocean begins to rise up before us, and I direct it at will, a wall of water surging toward the rogues. Some are big enough to hold their ground, while others try to flee back into the sea. But it’s not fast enough as they’re drowned under the sheer force of the water.

Tristen looks over at me, turning back into a man. His eyes become filled with wild power, and he extends his hand outward toward the wall of water. The wind picks up around us, whipping my hair into my face as he pushes against the water, pulling it back out to sea with incredible force. The rogues who had tried to stand their ground are swept far out to sea. Some battle against the current, but it’s useless, and they slip beneath the waves.

My heart hammers in my chest as I become aware of Marian cackling beside me, as she waves to the disappearing rogues in celebration. I glance over at Tristen, who stands in absolute shock, staring at me. Looking down at my hands, which now look completely normal, I feel an unfamiliar sensation wash over me.

Power.

Chapter 17 - Tristen

I take a sip of the amber liquid, letting the whiskey burn my throat. I almost wish it burned more—alcohol doesn’t have much of an effect on shifters, but we do enjoy

the initial buzz. We just metabolize it too fast to enjoy the lingering effects humans do. Right now, I could do with a bit of oblivion.

Ryan sits across from me, looking equally grim. The quiet of my office is only punctuated by the sound of him slamming his empty glass down.

I've decided what my least favorite alpha responsibility is: telling families that their loved ones died defending the pack.

After collecting what was left of Sean's body from the dunes, we brought him back to town, and I headed straight to tell the family. It's going to take a long time to wash his blood from my soul. I grew up with Sean. His entire family relocated to the western shore when I became alpha so he could take up his rightful position as one of our leaders. He was a great man, a great beta.

It takes a lot to kill a shifter. Those were monsters, not just rogues. I stand and walk to the window. Looking down, I see Emily sitting on the back steps, engrossed in a phone call. I imagine it's with Ava. I only wrapped up my own call with Callum and Aiden a few minutes ago, one filled with anger and a whole load of trepidation over what Malik has coming our way next. If he can turn rogues into those monsters, we're almost out of time to figure out what the hell to do.

I note Emily's hand resting on her still-flat stomach and feel my heart race. Despite all she's going through, I can see how focused she is on our baby, keeping them safe. A thought hits me: she's going to be an amazing mother, like, really incredible.

She's nodding at something Ava has obviously said, and I can see the determination in her expression. She seems a lot more grounded since her magic unlocked. I still can't get over her sheer power on the beach. It's going to take some time to process everything we witnessed. The only thing I know for sure is that more of us would have been dead without her. We were completely unprepared for the rogues

possessing new powers. That can't ever happen again.

"She okay?" Ryan says, refilling our glasses and coming to stand next to me at the window.

I nod. "Yeah, she's something else," I reply, knocking back the whiskey.

"Never thought I'd hear you say that about a witch," Ryan chuckles, genuinely amused. "You gonna be able to trust her with all that power?"

"Ironically, I'm more concerned with her trusting me at this point," I say quietly.

Ryan looks confused. "Trust you in what way?"

"To keep her safe? Our baby is safe. To keep the whole damn pack safe when we don't know what Malik is going to unleash next," I reply.

Having just spoken to my brothers, I know these are the issues weighing on everyone's minds. Even Marian is proving her worth as a leader in ways I never anticipated. Shifters have ruled this island for millennia. My father always made it sound as though we tolerated the witches out of some kind of charity and that their magic was annoying and devious at best. Having witnessed Marian and her sisters in battle, I can't believe I ever thought their magic was limited to trickster spells and bewitching. Given that Ralph claimed to know witches all too well, I can't help but wonder why he never shared the extent of their power. Or that the covens are just as loyal to each other as shifter packs are.

I'm starting to question if Emily, or her coven, ever bewitched me. Is it really possible that what I felt in the forest that day was the mates bond? And I've just been blowing it all along? I down the rest of my glass, this time relishing the tiniest of rushes as it hits my system.

“Tristen, mate, you all right?” Ryan asks, concern etched on his face.

He’s never seen me this out of sorts. It’s a feeling I could do without. The truth is I’m terrified not just for Emily and our unborn child but for everyone. We’ve always known Malik was coming for us, but now I realize we have no idea what he’s truly capable of.

“Better than Sean or his family,” I reply grimly. Knowing I need to change the subject before I dwell too much, I ask for an update on the emergency patrol we sent out with some witches to reinforce the runes, including along the beaches. My brothers are doing the same, though I feel for Aiden. So much of the mountains is inaccessible to witches, and is barely even accessible to shifters. On one hand, there’s no way the rogues are traveling in and out of those areas, but Malik? With his shapeshifting abilities, we’re beginning to narrow down where he might be living, and the mountains are the most obvious choice.

Ryan looks at his phone, pulling up our tracking app and messages. “They’re at one of the final checkpoints,” he says. “Everything looks good so far.”

I turn to look at the map on the wall, my stomach in knots. “We need to organize more patrols. They are getting bolder and bolder. We can’t risk another ambush like that. We need to hunt them down before they come for us.” Then, sighing, I add, “I’m going to go and check on Emily. Let me know if you hear anything.”

“Will do,” Ryan says as I walk out of the office, leaving him to check on the other patrols—and hopefully not finish my whiskey. Sean’s death has hit him hard, too.

Grabbing a coffee from the pot on my way through the kitchen, I take a long drink as I walk out onto the patio to chase away the last of the whiskey. Emily appears to have just finished up her call as she turns to me, the phone still in her hand.

“Ava okay?” I ask, knowing how stressed out Callum is, waiting for the birth.

Emily nods thoughtfully, “I think she’s handling it better than Callum and Harper, they’re too impatient.” She smiles at that, and, despite her weariness, it still lights up her whole damn face.

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I can't help glancing at her stomach, considering that we'll be the ones waiting for our pup's arrival soon. I run a hand through my hair, well aware I haven't even combed it today. My stubble is days old, and I must look feral. Emily, on the other hand, looks radiant despite all she's been through. Her long red hair is falling in tantalizing waves almost to her waist, and my fingers are itching to reach out and touch it.

"Are you okay?" she suddenly asks, taking me by surprise.

I don't feel ready to answer that, afraid of what the truth might actually sound like if I were to utter it. I look away, over the backyard and toward the meadow and forest beyond. In the distance lies the outline of the mountains that mark the beginning of Aiden's territory, where I fear Malik may be hiding.

I clear my throat. "I've been better," I finally admit. "But right now, I'm more worried about you and the baby."

Stepping forward, I take her hand and lead her over toward the bench seats that line the patio. She sits and looks at me quizzically. We don't do this. We don't sit and talk. There's always too much, either unsaid or hurtful—too many things that shouldn't be said.

But I can see how foolish that is. How foolish I've been, holding onto my preconceived ideas about witches and not seeing what's right in front of me. When Emily unleashed the most powerful demonstration of a witch's magic I've ever seen, instead of putting me off, I only felt proud. And full of awe.

“What is it, Tristen?” she asks, her eyes beginning to look glassy. “You’re making me nervous.”

I squeeze her hand, “No, no, it’s nothing like that,” I say quickly, “I just...” I don’t know how to find the words.

“It’s okay,” she says, giving my hand a squeeze. “You don’t have to say anything.”

But I do. I need to.

“I was wrong,” I begin. “I don’t think you bewitched me.”

Her eyes go wide, but she doesn’t say anything, as if waiting to see what I’ll say next, her walls firmly still up. I sigh, “Ralph always told me th—”

Before I can say another word, Ryan suddenly comes crashing through the doors. I’m about to tell him to fuck off, but as I turn, I see the fear in his eyes, and my heart drops. “They’re h-here,” he stammers for the first time in his life. “I can’t reach the patrol; all the signals are down. They’re literally heading into town...the rogues.”

Emily gasps, the color draining from her face. But instead of fear, I only feel rage. This ends now. “Sound the alarm,” I say firmly. “Everyone knows what to do; we’ve planned for this.”

And we have. Emergency scenarios to protect the most vulnerable and mount a defense. Even with the one patrol out missing, we have enough betas and witches in town to follow our emergency protocols. I stand firing off the pre-written alarm to my brother’s packs; I’ve no idea if they’re under attack, too, or if they can send help.

“What can I do?” Emily asks.

The plan always involved her helping the vulnerable and pups get to the pack hall and being there to distribute runes. But as I look at her now, I can feel her new powers brewing, the gentle sparks dancing on her fingers, and her emerald eyes glowing with magic. But I can't risk her, not after what we witnessed on the dunes; what if her ability to control her magic was just a one-off?

"Stick with the plan, Emily," I say, adding, "please."

I think she's going to argue for a moment, but then she nods. "Okay, but once all the children are safe, I have to help, too," she replies, and I nod, hoping that we'll have it under control before she's finished at the hall and that it won't come to that.

It's only when we get out onto the main street, pack members already rushing down the street toward the hall in a panic, that I realize the scale of the fight we're going to have. In the distance, I can already see smoke billowing from several of the businesses that lie on the road toward the mountains, and the sound of fighting ahead.

"Emily, get these people to the hall," I yell, as my betas begin to shift and my wolf begins to take over. "Activate all the runes, every single one. Call for reinforcements."

She nods, but I can see the fear in her eyes. Still, she steps up immediately, encouraging the pack members to move faster. The hall up ahead is a hive of activity as the witches staying there pour out to help with the children and start activating the defenses that have been designed to provide a sanctuary area in the heart of the town. A scream sounds from somewhere behind me as the first rogues appear along the long main street.

"Everyone back," I yell as I let my wolf take control, my bones snapping and contorting as the power surges through me.

Leading the way toward the rogues, I summon the wind to push the giant magic-infused beasts back, giving us the advantage. They fight against the pressure of the wind, almost standing still as we attack. I tear into the first one, grateful to have Ryan by my side as he intercepts another, trying to bite my flank. Once one of them falls, the magic shrivels away, and the dead, mangled rogue is left lying in the street. For all their ferociousness, they aren't any harder to kill—just a hell of a lot bigger.

I look to my side and see Ryan and James taking down another of the rogues together, blood flowing down the street as they both tear into the beast until he slumps to the floor, transforming back into a man in his final moments.

I'm so engrossed in the moment, giving my wolf free rein to do what he needs to do to protect the pack, that I don't even notice the commotion behind us until Ryan yanks me back. As I turn, I'm greeted by a sight I hoped I wouldn't have to deal with. Emily is standing in the street at the center of a group of witches, her hands holding a ball of dark energy.

"What are you doing?" I growl, looking over my shoulder as another rogue barrels toward me.

"I can do this," she says simply, and before I can protest, she sends a blast of power toward the rogue that had been about to tear into me. It slams him into a bench with enough force to shatter it but not kill him. "I'm not going to let them attack us like this."

The fight rages on around me, and I realize there's little I can do without turning my back on the rogues. Besides, her power really is incredible. I watch as she fires a volley of dark energy over our heads toward a group of rogues advancing from the side of the square, and I watch them writhe in pain as the magic tears into their skin.

I turn to look back at Emily in awe, but she's not there. I desperately scan the street

until I see her red hair running through the crowd toward two small children, frantically ushering them away from oncoming rogues. I will her to use her magic on them, but she seems to falter for a moment, and then a rogue moves fast, throwing something over her, almost like a translucent net.

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“No,” I roar, tearing toward them, but the battle has shifted as if being orchestrated; more and more rogues appear in front of me. I look at Ryan, who is just as confused. “They’ve got Emily. I need to push through.”

As seconds begin to feel like hours, I fight against the tide of rogues, but it’s becoming clear that they’re less interested in defeating us and more in slowing us down. Some of the witches have tried to intervene but are also being repelled. I watch helplessly as Emily is picked up and carried away, disappearing down one of the streets that lead directly to the forest trails.

My initial desperation slowly gives way to complete and utter rage. I begin tearing out the throats of every rogue I can reach, an absolute bloodlust taking hold at the thought of them taking Emily, my mate.

Chapter 18 - Emily

I become dimly aware of something damp on my face and try to brush it away, but my hands don’t seem to work properly. It takes so much effort for them to reach my face. When I do, I feel a strange texture, like wet grass resting against my cheek. The confusion sets in hard, and my brain spins, trying to catch up with my reality.

Tristen, I think desperately. Where is he? The sound of fighting and shifters howling in the distance sounds distorted but shatters the silence, and I whimper, my heart pounding in my chest. I’m in the forest, and he’s close, but he feels so far away somehow.

My surroundings come into focus, and I realize I’m in a clearing. The trees tower

above me, their branches reaching for the sky, but as the trucks rise, their leaves begin to look distorted; glancing around, nothing looks right. A haze surrounds me as though the clearing is in some kind of cocoon. The smell of damp earth and pine needles fills my senses, but underneath it all, there's something else. I can sense I'm not alone. I turn sluggishly, expecting to face the rogues, but instead, I see someone far more terrifying. Malik. He must be close by, too. Fear grips my insides like icy claws digging into my stomach.

I struggle to sit up, but my body rebels against me. Panic wells up inside me when I notice the strange golden netting they threw over me is still half covering my body. It feels warm against my skin, the heat seeping into my very bones. I try to push it off, but it takes all of my energy just to move it a fraction. It's made of pure energy, almost weightless, but somehow feels as heavy as concrete.

I hear him chuckle. Laughter usually sounds light or fun, but this sound is anything but. "You're even more pathetic than I thought," he sneers, the laughter fading as he approaches.

I curl into a ball as he crouches in front of me, my thoughts immediately going to my unborn baby and what he might do to us. "L-let me go," I attempt. "Tristen will find me."

Malik laughs again, just as humorlessly. "Oh, please," he scoffs, "that dog could run right by us, and my shield would hide us. He could be looking right at you and see nothing."

My heart stops at his words, and I can feel the fear bubbling up in my chest. "Let me go!" I scream as loudly as I can, but the netting muffles my voice, making it sound tiny and warped.

"I don't think so," he muses, running his hand over my hair. I cringe away from his

touch, feeling repulsed. "You see, you are far too valuable for me to let you go. Your bloodline is rarer than you think." He smirks, and dread coils in my stomach as realization dawns on me. He knows a lot more about my power than I do.

"What do you want from me?" I spit out through gritted teeth, trying to sound braver than I feel.

His eyes glint with malevolence as he leans in close enough for me to smell his foul breath. "Everything."

I shudder, my breathing becoming ragged as I try to make sense of his words. He straightens up, towering over me and running a hand over my hair, and I can't help but flinch away from his touch.

"Your father, Aaron," he begins, and I stiffen at the mention of my father's name, knowing I'm about to find out more than I've ever known about him. "He and I," Malik continued, "were once close. Bothers. We were going to rule. But then he met your mother." His voice is dripping with contempt, and I can feel the hatred emanating from him in waves. "She had power—nothing like ours, though. Not worth giving everything up for."

He crouches down again, his eyes boring into mine. "He went and got her pregnant, starting to talk about building a life here. Living with the witches." Malik scoffs as if it were the most ridiculous suggestion.

I swallow past the lump in my throat, already suspecting how this story ends. "What did you do?"

Malik shakes his head as if feigning sadness. "I had to kill him," he shrugs. "We had a deal to never share our gifts, never reveal our magic. And certainly never to settle for less than we deserve. We stuck to that for millennia, only for him to want to throw

it all away for some witch.”

A wave of sadness hits me for my parents. They must have really loved each other. I always assumed my father had simply left. It wasn't unusual for witches to raise their children as single mothers in the coven, and I just figured that had been my mother's plan. But now, I can see they intended to really be together. The heartbreak must have been unimaginable. I don't even think she knew he had died.

Malik pulls the last of the netting from me as he continues, “I looked for you, you know. We're family, after all.” He laughs. “I couldn't find you, though. I assumed you died with your whore mother. Until there you were. Your magic is weak but undeniable to me. A little parting gift from my dear brother. And a baby, too, with elemental magic from the shifters. Delicious.”

My blood runs cold; I know he absorbs magic. I know it kills whoever he targets. My hand rests subconsciously on my belly, and I curl into a ball as if I can somehow shield my unborn child. Whatever magic was in that net has left my power weak. What little control I have over my powers feels dimmed. I look at Malik and briefly wonder if he resembles my father; they were brothers, after all. But Marian said my mother had good taste and that Aaron was handsome. Malik is anything but. His muscles ripple with strength, and he's tall, but his face looks gaunt in comparison, and his eyes are wild and far too black.

“You know, Aaron nearly killed me. It was a hell of a fight,” he sneers. “It's taken me years to recover, living off the scraps of rogues and witches, but once I take your power, I'll be unstoppable. I guess it's Aaron's way of finally making it up to me.”

I know I need to keep him talking. It's already occurred to me that with this shield up, he doesn't seem to have any intention of taking me further into the forest. That must mean he intends to take my magic, my baby, right here. The longer I can keep him talking, the longer I have to try and escape or hope that Tristen finds me.

Malik continues to ramble about Aaron, and part of me wants to listen and learn as much about my father as possible, but I know that I need to focus on surviving. That's what my parents would have wanted. I try to summon my powers, but I feel all over the place. It feels like the shield itself is stifling my energy in a similar way to the netting. I search my pockets and feel several of the small smooth runes I'd been handing out earlier; rubbing my fingers over the engravings, I begin to activate them. Malik could never cross the rune defenses, and that's probably what he meant about still being weak. Perhaps I can use them to defend myself.

Suddenly, I hear a commotion in the forest beyond the shield as a group of shifters and rogues crash through the undergrowth not far from our position. Fighting and tearing chunks out of each other, oblivious to our presence. I desperately try to see if Tristan is there, shouting as loud as I can, but no one even looks up. Malik laughs hysterically, "They can't see you. Even the dogs can't even sense you," he giggles. "They could be looking right at you, and they'd just see trees."

I look again and see the shield's golden shimmer glowing slightly, blurring the shifters on the other side. I'm close to the edge of the shield but too scared to reach out and touch it in case it dims my power even more. When Malik turns away again, I attempt to see if I can summon any energy, and the tiniest spark appears at my fingertips. Not enough.

I attempt to supercharge the runes with the little energy I have, something that Marian talked to me about and showed promising results. They begin to grow hotter in my pocket, and I feel a tiny boost to my powers as the fog I feel begins to lift slightly. More fighters break through the tree line, and Malik watches with glee as the vicious fighting continues. In the distance, I see Ryan fending off a rogue with one of the other betas. I open my mouth to call out to him, but then pause, knowing it's useless and not wanting to draw Malik's attention back toward me while I'm still working with the runes, desperate for some kind of defense.

With Malik's back still turned as he seems to be entertained by the fighting beyond the shield, I take one of the runes from my pocket and slide it up against the shield. Although my arm feels weaker the closer I get to it, the rune's magic doesn't falter, and I notice the shield's golden glow diminish slightly as the rune touches it.

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Perhaps I need to be further away from the shield, but the runes need to be closer.

I take another rune and push it against the shield, creating a tiny patch of disturbance in the shield. I wonder if it's a genuine hole in the magic or simply disturbed energy. Before I can think about it, I suddenly feel Tristen's presence. It's like a warmth spreading over me. My soul is calling out to his. I look up as another wave of fighters moves through the forest in a blur of violence. I don't see him at first, but I know he's there.

Then I see him burst through the tree line and rush straight past the shield. Instinctively, I reach out a hand, almost willing him to stop. He looks desperate and feral as he shouts something to Ryan I don't catch. Then he races off but stops abruptly, shifting into human form and glancing around.

"Well, well, well," Malik says, walking to stand directly behind me as I return to my curled-up position in an effort to hide the runes behind me. "It appears that shifter bond even extends beyond their own pathetic species."

I turn slightly to check where he is, but don't respond. I can barely tear my eyes away from Tristen's face. Despite the fact he's covered in blood, and disheveled from the fight, he's as handsome as ever. Something deep within me stirs at the thought of our family, and the very real danger that we will never have a future.

I physically feel it when Malik steps back into the center of the shield, his darkness retreating momentarily. Then, he claps his hands together. "It's been a fun show, but I'm done waiting," he declares. "It's ironic that he knows you're near but can't see you. You can see him, though, and you can watch his confusion as your bond dies

with you. When I drop the shield to kill him, he'll see your body first."

The cruelty of his words takes me aback. "Why do you hate me so much? What have I ever done to you?"

Malik pauses for a moment, as if thrown by the question, but then sneers. "You represent my brother's greatest weakness and betrayal," he says, leveling me with a hard stare. "Of course, I'd kill you anyway for your power, but I'm going to enjoy it even more as a final fuck-you to Aaron."

As Malik spins around, lifting his hands high as his dark energy begins to manifest, I know I'm out of time. He's going to kill me and my unborn child. And then, he's going to kill Tristen. I fumble in my pocket for the last of the runes, channeling everything I have into them, making them burn my skin as their magic spirals almost out of control. Malik chants in an unrecognizable language, oblivious to my movements, as I pull the runes from my pocket. I glance at Tristen, whose eyes are fixed on me, almost as if he can see me, but the confusion in his expression tells me he can't.

I know I only have one chance, one shot. Lifting my hand, I throw all the runes at the tiny hole made by the other two and follow up with a blast of dark energy that completely drains the last of my strength.

"You bitch," Malik roars as the golden shield falters, almost completely fading. I roll over to shield my stomach from Malik's advance and try to gather my power again. Facing Tristen, I see the exact moment he spots me through the faded barrier and unleashes his own attack, summoning a direct hit of hurricane-strength wind that breaks through, knocking Malik off his feet and flinging him across the clearing.

Chapter 19 - Tristen

My heart races with a level of panic I didn't even know existed until now. With Emily gone and both she and our unborn child in danger, my mind races with the knowledge that I stand to lose absolutely everything.

My pack is under siege, and my family is gone.

The forest rushes by in a blur. When a rogue appears in front of me, I barely pause before ripping out his throat. The first time I saw the magically enhanced size of the rogues, I was intimidated. Now, fuelled by pure rage and desperation to find Emily, I barely register the threat. My fur matted with blood and dirt, I continue along the trail deeper into the trees, driven by an unseen bond with Emily that refuses to be severed.

I came so damn close to telling her how I really feel. What I really want. Her and our baby, our whole future. Why couldn't I just say the words, or tell her before now? Why did I waste all this time when I knew right from the start? I knew it the first day I met her. My wolf knew, he tried to tell me, but I refused to see it just because she was a witch. I assumed the worst because of what Ralph taught me about witches.

Deep down, I know I don't agree with Ralph on almost everything. Why would I believe him on this? I wish I knew the answer, but the truth is, I refused to listen to reason for far too long and wasted so much time. I don't even know if Emily can ever be happy with me, considering how I've treated her. After everything she's been through with her parents, the coven, her magic, and me treating her as though she were a criminal, why would she ever want to build a family with me? I don't deserve her or all the opportunities I've had to make this right and failed to take.

I see fighting up ahead and realize that Ryan and a couple of my betas are being held up by a small group of rogues. One breaks free to attack me, but Ryan yanks him back while Oliver, one of my betas, tears out his throat. I'm relieved to see we're taking minimal casualties thanks to all the training we've put in and the runes the witches have given everyone that offer some protection. But it's not going to be

enough if these rogues keep coming.

Intending to continue along the trail in search of Emily, I turn to tell Ryan, but suddenly pause, hit by the overwhelming sensation that Emily is near. The mate bond.

Glancing around the clearing, it appears empty, but it feels as though she's standing right next to me. My wolf begins to feel disorientated, and my vision appears unable to focus properly on the space in front of me. Even though I can't see her, I also can't leave. So in tune is the mate bond, I know she's here, even though I can't see her.

Feeling dizzy, I shift back into human form and survey the clearing again. I'm dimly aware of a rogue behind me, taken out by Ryan, who is watching my back, but just as I'm about to say something to him, I hear an almighty crack that seems to split the very air around me. A flash of shimmering golden light almost knocks me backward, and when I look up, I can see Emily lying on the ground with Malik only a few feet away, standing in what had been an empty clearing only seconds before. Runes litter the ground near my feet, and Emily's hands smolder with magical residue.

"You bitch," Malik thunders, advancing on Emily, who is curled into a ball on the floor.

Knowing I have to stop him, I summon the power of the wind faster than ever before. A direct blast of the strongest hurricane wind I can muster sends Malik flying across the clearing. Rushing forward, I grab Emily and pull her away from the center of the clearing.

Running my hands over her, I'm frantic. "Are you okay?" I ask. "Did he hurt you?"

She shakes her head and clings to my shoulders. "He's going to kill our baby," she says, her voice cracking.

I shake my head. “No, he’s not,” I assure her, my voice strong and steady. Though turning back toward Malik, I feel my confidence slip slightly as he begins to shift right in front of me. Huge dragon wings unfurl from behind his muscular frame, which begins to twist in shape, scales appearing before my eyes. I should be accustomed to the shifting process, but seeing a dragon's metamorphosis is something different altogether.

Staggering back, I know I’ll need all my power to even stand a chance in this fight. But losing isn’t an option. As Malik’s dragon lifts into the air, I see the fire in his mouth and focus a volley of wind at his wings, knocking him off balance as he misfires a blast of orange fire.

As he slams into the ground, I see an opportunity and shift into my wolf form, launching myself at him, intent on tearing out his throat or at least damaging his wings. But as I get close, he whips around with his long black tail, sending me flying through the air. I crash into a tree and slump to the forest floor, momentarily dazed.

“Tristen,” Emily calls out, and I see her scramble toward me, dodging Malik’s tail. “I-I’ll hold him off,” she says, turning to face the dragon.

No, I think, pulling myself to my feet and shifting back. I sway slightly but draw on my reserves to use the power deep within me, summoning the very forest itself. Branches and vines are ripped out by tendrils of wind, lashing out at Malik and entangling him. He roars and thrashes, trying to break free. Wrapped in vines and battered by the trees, I know it won’t hold him for long.

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“You have to get out of here,” I bellow at Emily, but she shakes her head.

“I’m not leaving you,” she replies, “we have to finish this.”

Just then, Malik breaks free of his temporary forest prison, rising to his full height and towering over us. His eyes glow red with rage, and the ground beneath us trembles. Emily instinctively steps closer to me, and I slip my hand into hers. The words are unspoken: I don’t know if we can defeat him, but I’ll die trying to save her if it comes to it.

With a roar, Malik launches himself at us, and I brace for impact, preparing to use the last of my power to protect Emily and our unborn child. I raise my hands, summoning the wind to try and hold him back, but just as we’re about to collide, a blast of white-hot lightning explodes around us, and Malik’s dragon screeches in either rage or pain, I’m not sure.

Turning, I see Callum and Aiden, along with some of their betas. There’s no time to even greet my brothers as we move in unison, our powers flowing as we unleash a volley at Malik that forces his dragon into the air to evade us. Suddenly, Emily is by my side, and I see her hands form a ball of dark energy, which she fires directly at one of Malik’s wings. Black blood gushes from the wound as the dragon flails in the sky, looking as though he may crash into the tree canopy.

Suddenly, though, he rights himself, his gaze fixed on Emily. Banking hard, he swoops down and fires directly at her. I don’t even have time to think before pushing her out of the way, the fiery magic hitting my side and lighting up my whole body. I scream, but no words come out before everything goes black.

I regain consciousness and find Emily standing over me, facing Malik as she seems to transform before my very eyes. Her hair lights up from within in a golden glow, her feet lifting off the ground, and her energy seems to engulf her in a haze. Malik's dragon appears to try and turn away, but she doesn't give him a chance; she fires again and again—pure black magic straight at his chest. The dragon howls and fires back, the shots raining down on the forest. I hear screams all around as shifters, what's left of the rogues, and witches all run for cover.

My brothers are standing with Emily. Malik's power is immense, but with all three focused on him, they appear to be turning the tide. I stagger to my feet, using the last of my energy to summon a huge blast of wind that obviously takes Malik by surprise as he slams against the rock face nearby. Shrieking with rage, he pushes off the rocks and blankets the forest with a volley of dark energy. I dive on top of Emily, pulling her underneath me as we all brace against the impact. As the dust settles, I jump up, searching the sky for Malik, but he's gone.

"Did anyone see where he went?" I call out, but only a few murmur in response.

The forest is torched with small fires burning all around. I look down and see Emily crumpled on the floor, her skin deathly pale. Crouching down, I lift her into my arms. "Em, are you okay?" I whisper frantically, "Talk to me."

Callum puts his hand on my shoulder. "Get her back to town. We'll take care of this," he says, gesturing to the fires.

Nodding, I set off along the trail with Emily in my arms. She only murmurs without regaining consciousness, but at least I know she's alive. "Just hang on, love," I whisper, trying not to let the panic take hold. I have no idea what all this may have done to her, to our baby.

One thing becomes clear as I approach the town—the rogues have been almost completely wiped out. Bodies litter the trail, and from the numbers, I'd assume this was most of his rogue army. I spot some of my brother's betas rounding up the few rogue survivors. If Malik thought our island was divided after Ralph's death, he was wrong. My brothers came through for Emily and me today. Malik is badly injured, hopefully dying somewhere, and without his rogues for once, I can see an end to all this. But none of that matters without Emily and our baby.

Rushing through the town square, I see Marian with our pack medic leaning over an injured witch. The scene is chaotic, with pack members running around, tending to the wounded, and checking on each other. Marian seems to sense our arrival and looks up, her eyes widening before she's on her feet, heading toward us. "Emily?" she asks, looking at her stricken form in my arms. "What happened? Where's Malik?"

Swallowing hard, I nod toward the forest. "Defeated, I hope," I say. "Certainly very injured, thanks to Emily, but we don't know more yet. The baby?"

Marian nods grimly as she directs me toward the hall and what appears to be a makeshift clinic. "Bring her here," she commands, gesturing to a bed in the corner.

Emily stirs throughout the examination but doesn't regain consciousness. Marian calls the coven healer over, and they begin to check her over. I can't help but feel useless as I stand there watching them, waiting for any sign of life from Emily.

After what feels like hours, Marian approaches me. "The baby is safe," she says, and I feel like all the air has been knocked out of me with pure relief. "Emily is exhausted. Her magic is untrained—unknown, really. She has obviously pushed herself beyond her body's rhythms. She'll wake up when her body has recharged."

Marian sounds so confident and even...caring. It almost takes me aback. I put my

hand on her shoulder, and we both flinch a little at the unusual move. “Thank you, Marian,” I say, my voice filled with sincerity and respect. “I owe you and the witches a great debt for all your help.”

If I’m not mistaken, the usually stoic witch’s eyes go slightly glassy for a moment as she nods, but within a flash, it’s gone, and her usual demeanor returns with a vengeance. She shrugs me off and walks away, turning to look over her shoulder and replying breezily, “A witch always collects, Alpha.”

With that, she walks away, and I pull up a chair next to Emily, taking in her pale skin and the tiredness marring her features even in sleep. I run my hand through her hair, hoping she can feel the love in my touch. I know I’ve been a complete ass to her, but now that I know she’s my mate, everything feels different. She never bewitched me; it was the natural mates' bond, and I was too stupid to see it. Despite everything, she fought by my side like a warrior, and is carrying our child. I owe her everything and just want a chance to beg for her forgiveness.

As the night wears on, the clinic around us remains busy with all the injuries, but our corner of the hall is quiet. Eventually, I hear a soft sound and look up to see her eyelidsflickering open as she looks around, confused. I reach over, grasping her hand. “Thank the goddess,” I murmur.

Her hands are uncoordinated but move up to rest on her stomach. “T-the baby?” she asks, her eyes filled with concern.

“The baby is fine,” I assure her, “you just needed a rest.”

She nods at that, visibly relieved. Silence falls for a moment, but I know I need to say what’s on my mind now. I can’t wait any longer. “I’m so sorry,” I blurt out. “I didn’t get a chance to explain earlier. I know you didn’t bewitch me; it was the mate bond. My wolf tried to tell me so many times, but I didn’t listen. I let my stupid prejudice

about witches cloud my judgment, and I've treated you so badly. I want you to know how proud I am of you, how much I want this family...how much I love you."

She stares at me, her emerald eyes incredibly hard to read. Despite the number of people in the hall, it seems to have gone very quiet. I suddenly realize I have never been this vulnerable. Ever.

Her hand, which has been resting on her stomach, slides over to mine, and I hold my breath. "I love you, too," she says quietly.

I exhale a shaky breath, relief coursing through me. "I can't believe I almost lost you," I whisper, brushing her hair back from her face. "I will spend a lifetime proving I'm worthy of you."

She smiles weakly. "You've always been worthy, Tristen," she says, her voice barely above a whisper. "Maybe you had to figure that out for yourself."

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She moves over slightly, and I climb into the narrow bed with her, pulling her against me as she begins to tell me about what Malik told her when they were locked in the shield. As the truth about her family unravels and her tears fall, I hold her tighter, whispering the reassurance that she has a family who loves her—a whole pack that supports her, and an island that owes her everything.

Epilogue - Emily

Holding the tiny bundle in my arms wrapped in a blanket, I marvel at his strength as he wriggles, making the sweetest little snuffle noises. His dark hair sets off his mesmerizing light blue eyes, and I can't help but chuckle. "You're going to have your work cut out here," I say, looking at Ava. "He's already a heartbreaker."

The proud new mum looks at her son, pure love shining in her eyes. "He will be a perfect gentleman," she protests, taking him back for a feeding. "But yes, he is so handsome, there will inevitably be some broken hearts."

We both laugh as she settles him down, and we look out over the meadow from the patio. It's so quiet up here, but down on the grass, an interpack games tournament is well underway, with Ava's daughter Harper about to blow the whistle to kick things off.

"She looks happy," I remark as the little girl bounces around next to her father.

Ava nods. "She is. Family is everything," she replies wistfully, then looking at my rounded stomach, she chuckles, "As you're finding out."

I beam, because it's true. We can't wait for our baby to arrive. The change in Tristen has been complete. We left the clinic that night holding hands in front of everyone, the closeness of our relationship no longer hidden. The biggest sign of Tristen's change of heart has been the way he has welcomed the witches into his pack properly. No longer living on the fringes or merely tolerating them for the use of their defenses, the pack is now helping the witches rebuild their coven property while offering proper housing in the meantime, and a place within the medical center so that not only shifters get the care they need.

Ironically, the mixing of shifter medicine with the witches' healing powers is already proving far superior for everyone—something that Callum's pack had already discovered, but Tristen had been too stubborn to listen before.

Tristen has even been holding regular meetings with Marian to better integrate the community. I asked him if he's still afraid of Marian, and he replied that, to be fair, he will always be afraid of her. But now he deeply respects her as a leader, too. I think everyone's a little afraid of Marian.

In the distance, I hear Harper blow the whistle, and cheering erupts as the first contest begins. Owen, Ava's new baby, barely makes a sound as we turn to watch from our vantage point on the patio.

The first round is wrestling, and as I watch Tristen step bare-chested into the ring, my heart begins to race. He's up against Aiden, and as the two brothers circle each other, it's clear this is a dance they've done many times before. The fight escalates as only it can between brothers until Callum has to split them up.

Tristen is declared the winner of the round, but Aiden seems to take it in good spirits, at least. As the next contenders step up, Tristen heads my way, still shirtless. I hear Ava stifle a laugh next to me. "Your face, Emily." She pretends to gasp. "It's like I can read your mind, and it's all filthy."

I can feel my face burning with embarrassment, but she's not wrong. Perhaps it's the pregnancy hormones, but I can't keep my eyes off of him—the way his muscles ripple in the sunlight, the way his eyes lock with mine, and I can tell he knows exactly what I'm thinking.

He smirks as he walks up. “Are you ladies enjoying the view?”

I open my mouth to rebuff, but Ava simply levels him with a stare and smiles. “Yes, we are,” she replies, pointing to Callum wrestling one of his betas shirtless. “Just look at the view.”

We laugh as Ava shushes us so as not to wake Byron. Tristen drapes a slightly sweaty arm around me, pulling me toward him, and I instinctively lean in. “Did Aiden mind losing the first round?” I ask, knowing how competitive the brothers are.

“He always hates losing, but he's got bigger things on his mind,” Tristen says cryptically.

“Like what?” asks Ava, concerned. Malik was never found, and the rumor persists that the most likely place he's hiding is in the mountains, in Aiden's territory. Countless search patrols haven't yielded anything, but so much of the territory is still uncharted or inaccessible...unless you can shift into a dragon.

“After everything that's happened, Nolan reached out to Aiden and offered a treaty to firm up our port security, stop future rogues, and the like,” he says thoughtfully.

“Strange he reached out to Aiden when he has the smallest port?” I think out loud, and Tristen nods.

“Well, it would be, but Aiden's also the only alpha who is still unmated,” he says, letting us catch up with what he's saying. When my eyes go wide with understanding,

he nods. “It’s a mate’s treaty. Nolan is suggesting an interpack mating.”

“Oh wow,” Ava exclaims, and I understand her shock. The thought of Aiden being mates with anyone seems unlikely. I have never met a shifter who enjoys flirting more; it’s almost his entire personality when a female is around.

“What did Aiden say?” I ask.

Tristen shrugs, “We’re sitting down to talk to Nolan about it next week. He didn’t actually dismiss it as quickly as I thought he would. I think he’s actually considering it.”

The impact of Malik’s constant attacks and overall threat has affected us all. The games continue, but my mind is elsewhere, pondering the future of our packs. Our alliances are shifting, but although they’re stronger, I can’t help but feel a sense of unease. Malik may be on the run, but is he really gone for good?

“Well, it will have to be someone pretty amazing to keep his attention for more than two minutes,” Ava says lightly. “He deserves to be happy, though; I hope it works.”

Tristen squeezes me a little tighter. “Well, it certainly worked out for me. I think it might actually do him some good.”

I turn to look at him and see the honest truth reflected back at me. Our unborn baby moves slightly in my stomach, a reminder of all that we have. If Aiden is willing to enter into an alliance to further strengthen our island, then I’ll welcome anything to keep our families safer.

As the afternoon wears on, Harper blows the last whistle, signaling the end of the tournament. We make our way down to the field to help clean up. Tristen helps the other men clear the bigger items from the meadow while Ava and I help the others

clear away the BBQ tables. Harper looks exhausted after keeping all the men in check with her referee duties and sits with Byron, entertaining him with a rattle. Looking at the two, I can't help but wonder if Tristen and I will have a big family and fill our home with children the way Callum and Ava are.

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As we wave goodbye to his brothers, Ava, and the children, I walk through the house that once felt so uninviting to me but is now the home I longed for. Yawning, I head into the kitchen to begin putting all the food away but Tritsen stops me, pulling me into his arms and placing his hands on my rounded belly. “Oh no,” he says, turning me around. “Don’t think I haven’t noticed how tired you are. Go lie down, and I’ll sort this out.”

For once, I don’t even bother arguing. Between the pregnancy and my enhanced magic training with Marian at the coven, I am tired. The sun is low in the sky when I lie down on the bed, promising myself just a few moments of rest, but the next thing I know, the room is in darkness, and I feel the bed dip as Tristen climbs in.

“Why are you still fully dressed, woman?” he laughs as I roll over into his arms. “You didn’t even make it into bed.”

I wake up more as he helps me remove my shirt. His large, rough hands send goosebumps over my skin as he gently unbuttons the material and slips it off my shoulders. The dim light from the hallway illuminates his large frame as he shrugs his own shirt off and then begins to ease my skirt away. I don’t know if he’s trying to tease me, but my skin is burning hotter than ever by the time I’m left in my underwear. As he leans on his elbow and looks down at me, I can’t resist any longer. I lean up and gently kiss him.

His lips are warm and urgent as he deepens the kiss and growls into my mouth. His hand slips beneath my bra and grazes my nipple through the fabric, making me gasp.

He pauses for a moment, just enough to look at me. “You are so fucking beautiful.”

It's almost reverent, the way he whispers the words, and it sends shivers down my spine. He trails kisses from my neck down my chest until he unclips my bra. With one tug, it's off, and his hot breath fans over my hardened nipples, making me shudder.

He licks and nips at each nipple until they harden even more under his attention, and then he begins kissing his way down to my rounded stomach before smoothing his hand over it and pulling down my panties in one swift move. I gasp as cool air hits the sensitive skin of my inner thighs, but he doesn't stop there. He spreads them wide with his hands and kisses along my thighs all the way to my most sensitive areas. The sensation is overwhelming, and I can feel myself getting wetter by the second as his tongue traces patterns on my folds.

I writhe under his attention, my core tightening as my inner walls contract. Sex has been so much more intense as the pregnancy progresses, and my orgasms are so strong. I urge him on as the feeling intensifies, and he begins to suck on my clit, flicking his tongue over the swollen bundle of nerves. It feels like I'm going to combust from the pleasure, and when he finally slips a finger inside me, it sends me over the edge.

I scream his name as I come, my body shaking under his lips. He pushes a second finger inside as I begin to relax, stretching me wider until I feel full. The slow drag of his tongue on my folds, combined with the penetration, feels so good, and I buck against him in need of more.

He climbs up the bed and kisses me, hard and demanding, his cock clearly aroused underneath his jeans. He slides them down, freeing his erection before encouraging me to roll onto my side and positioning himself at my entrance. He kisses my neck, cupping my heavy breasts for a moment before pushing inside, filling me completely in one smooth motion.

The feeling is indescribable, the way he owns every part of me with ease. We move together in perfect unison, our bodies finding a rhythm that feels unique to us, our

bond growing stronger every time we're together. His hands find mine and lace our fingers together above our heads as he begins to thrust harder into me. His hips meet mine with each stroke, hitting my G-spot with each thrust until my inner walls ripple with pleasure around his cock. I come again as he groans into my hair, twisting the strands around his fist as if he's trying to ground himself.

This time, my orgasm seems to go on forever until I feel him erupt inside me, his body tensing under the strain of his pleasure. He holds me there, pulling me impossibly tight against his bare chest as we catch our breath. We lie there for a while, just enjoying the afterglow of our intimacy, until I feel his cock stirring again. His hands trail up my stomach, cupping my breasts once more.

"You are everything," he whispers against my skin. "And I will worship you every day for the rest of our lives."

I smile into the darkness, feeling safe and loved in his arms as his cock hardens and his hand slips between my legs in search of more pleasure. The future may be uncertain in many ways, but with Tristen by my side, I know I have everything I have ever needed right here.

THE END