



Growl Me, Maybe

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Category: Romance, Paranormal

Description: When a secret necromancer with a daughter and a cursed ex-enforcer collide, the past doesn't just come back to haunt them...

It crashes on their doorstep — and calls him Daddy.

Mena Graves has spent the last two years raising her daughter alone and burying the memory of the one night that changed her life. She's got enough to handle working the Saltwater Grove ER, keeping her death magic under wraps, and avoiding questions about Lyra's very unique parentage. The last thing she needs?

Jax Hollow, the wolf who vanished without a word—and just passed out on her hospital floor.

Jax didn't leave by choice. Exiled by a deadly curse and hunted for the Nightfang blood in his veins, he never stopped thinking about the woman he lost or the daughter he never knew he had. But when a wave of corrupted necromancy starts targeting his kind, he'll have to team up with the one woman who makes his wolf ache—and burns hotter than any battle scar.

She's the mother of his child. He's the man fate won't let her forget. And as danger circles Saltwater Grove, neither of them can deny: Some bonds were never meant to break.

Total Pages (Source): 86

LYRA

Lyra Ravenshade had never seen a town blush before. But Celestial Pines? This place flushed with life. The cobbled streets glittered under the late morning sun, as if dusted with crushed moonstone. Tiny sparks of magic crackled in the air like static, ticklish, almost flirtatious. The hanging flower baskets above the shops leaned subtly toward her like they were nosy neighbors hungry for gossip.

“Alright, Lyra girl,” she murmured to herself, hands braced on her hips as she stood in front of the squat little cottage labeled ‘Visitor’s Office—Moonlit Welcome Wagon’, “this is your fresh start. New town, new job, and no more ‘accidental’ goat summoning.” She winced at the memory, shook it off with a flip of her auburn curls, and marched up the steps with a smile stitched stubbornly to her face.

The woman inside is Calla, her cousin and only thread of familiarity in this whimsical little town, waved her over with a herbal tea in one hand and a stack of keys in the other.

“You made it,” Calla said, her voice like a warm flannel blanket.

“Barely,” Lyra replied, exhaling like she’d been holding her breath the whole drive. “The map enchanted itself halfway through and started flirting with the GPS. I had to pull over and let them work it out.”

Calla chuckled, passing her the keys. “Celestial Pines does that. Magic gets... frisky

here. You'll get used to it. Your place is the green cottage two blocks down, flowers in the chimney. You'll be living above the apothecary with me."

"Please tell me that's not where you keep the graveyard herbs."

"No promises."

Lyra grinned, the tension in her shoulders starting to melt like butter on hot toast.

Calla tapped the final key. "And this one's for Moonfang Keep. Your new job. Think ancient estate meets command center. The pack runs most of the region's magical enforcement outta there. Old family property. Gothic with a side of grumpy."

Lyra raised a brow. "Grumpy?"

Calla gave her a dry look. "You'll see."

That didn't help.

Moonfang Keep rose like a shadow-stitched dream at the edge of town, perched on a pine-strewn bluff. The building looked like it had been plucked from a fantasy novel, part stone fortress, part oversized hunting lodge. Carved wolves lined the wrought-iron gate. A wild garden tangled itself up the front steps, and ivy clung to the outer walls like it never wanted to let go.

"Cozy," Lyra murmured, adjusting her bag on her shoulder. She climbed the steps with cautious optimism, inhaling the scent of pine, old stone, and something smoky that clung to the place like a memory.

Inside, the scent shifted, aged wood, ink, worn leather, and the faintest thread of wild. She stepped through the main hall and was greeted by... no one. The silence was

dense, like the place was holding its breath.

“Uh... hello?”

A door creaked open down the hallway, and a woman poked her head out. Mid-thirties, hair twisted into a neat braid, glasses perched on her nose like they were judging you.

“You must be the new admin.” She eyed Lyra’s outfit, a floaty skirt, charmed rings, and a sweater embroidered with smiling mushrooms—as if unsure whether to sigh or laugh.

“That’s me. Lyra Ravenshade.” She offered her hand, which was thoroughly ignored.

“I’m Delia. I handle logistics and communications. Jace isn’t in yet.”

Lyra tilted her head. “Jace?”

“Alpha Montgomery. The one who signed your paperwork. He’s... well, don’t expect a warm welcome.”

Lyra blinked. “That bad?”

Delia snorted. “He’s not bad, just... prickly. Doesn’t like interruptions. Or change. Or noise. Which is unfortunate considering your application said, and I quote, ‘I bring a little chaos wherever I go.’”

Lyra flushed. “I meant good chaos. You know, the fun kind. Like spontaneous dance breaks and glitter storms.”

Delia wasn’t smiling. “Just... try not to touch anything. Or charm the filing cabinets.

Last girl did, and one of them grew legs and ran into the forest.”

Lyra raised a hand in surrender. “Message received. Zero charm. Maximum discretion. Pinkie swear.”

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The rest of the morning passed in a blur of settling in—figuring out the mail ward system (the letters bit back), learning where to file reports on magical disturbances (in a cabinet labeled “Cranky Werewolf Business”), and generally trying to stay out of everyone’s way. She met two other staffers—Amos, the shy vampire who only worked nights and referred to her as “the chaos muffin,” and Petra, a dryad who watered herself at her desk every two hours and gave amazing gossip.

“So the alpha,” Petra whispered, watering her elbow vine. “Total lone-wolf vibes. Doesn’t date. Doesn’t laugh. Basically allergic to joy. I think he likes being lonely and bitter.”

Lyra tucked a curl behind her ear, pretending not to be curious. “Sounds intense.”

“Oh, he’s hot. Like, cave-you-up-against-a-wall hot. But cold. You know what I mean?”

She didn’t. But her face was burning.

Petra smirked. “Just saying, keep your wits. He won’t know what hit him.”

By mid-afternoon, Lyra had organized the entire magical archive room by hex category and mood. Her fingers were smudged with soot from a rogue burn scroll, and her head buzzed with spells, whispers, and... the sudden, bone-deep certainty that someone was watching her.

She turned toward the hallway and froze.

A man stood at the end of it.

He was tall. Towering, really. Broad in a way that made the hallway feel narrower. Dressed in dark jeans and a black henley that stretched deliciously across his chest, he had a face like carved stone—sharp jaw, dark brows, and storm-grey eyes that fixed on her like a snare.

Lyra's mouth went dry.

He looked as if the mountain air had forged him, wild and cold and impossible to ignore.

He looked at her the way storms looked at ships, curious about how fast they'd sink.

And when he spoke, his voice rumbled like distant thunder.

“You're in my office.”

Oh.Oh.

Jace Montgomery.

Alpha. Boss.

Definitelyhot. Definitelynotsmiling.

Lyra's heart tripped over itself. She managed a small, awkward wave.

“Hi. I brought muffins.”

JACE

By nine in the morning, Jace Montgomery had already broken up a sparring match, handled a boundary patrol dispute, and scolded two teenage shifters for shifting mid-argument behind the farmers market fruit stall.

He wasn't in the mood for paperwork. And he definitely wasn't in the mood for babysitting a new assistant.

"Dammit, Calla," he muttered under his breath as he yanked open the double doors to Moonfang Keep's central command hall—a cavernous room that smelled faintly of pine resin, old magic, and exhaustion. "You said she'd be helpful, not a distraction."

He hadn't wanted an assistant. Hell, he hadn't wanted half the changes the council kept throwing at him. But with Ezra Wolfe prowling at the edge of the territory and half his pack fraying at the seams, someone had to handle the influx of magical incident reports, council correspondence, and, for some reason, thirty-two unsigned requisition forms for enchanted boots.

Jace did everything. Always had. His father had taught him the weight of leadership before he could shift, before he understood what it meant to bear the title of Alpha Montgomery.

"You don't lead with teeth," his father used to say. "You lead with shoulders. Carry more than your share. Always."

And so he did. Every hour. Every damn day.

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He stood at the arched window, watching Celestial Pines stretch below like a living fairytale. Colorful rooftops, lampposts that flickered in daylight, shop windows blinking with enchantments and charm. A town full of magical oddities and ancient secrets, hidden from the human world beneath the Moonlit Veil.

He was the quiet engine that kept it running. Alpha of the Moonfang Pack. Protector of the Veil. Problem-solver for every supernatural squabble this side of the mountains.

But he hadn't been ready for today's first crisis—a minor fight between two shifter teens over the same girl. Fur had flown. One mailbox lost a door. The girl ended up leaving with neither of them.

Jace had stood there with arms crossed, watching the whole mess unfold with a headache blooming behind his eyes.

“Alpha,” Petra had said gently afterward, “your new assistant should be settling in. You might want to, uh... check on that.”

He had growled something unintelligible and stalked upstairs.

And that's when it happened.

He rounded the hallway, pushing open the office door, and everything... shifted.

There she was.

A mess of curls, fiery auburn laced with silver threads that shimmered even in the dusty lamplight. She was crouched in front of a file cabinet, sorting scrolls into piles that defied any organizational logic he'd ever seen. She wore a skirt that swirled around her knees like a stormcloud caught in a spell, and her sweater was embroidered with mushrooms. Smiling ones.

She smelled like wild honey, sun-warmed lavender, and something else. Something older. Something that twisted in his gut like a howl caught in his throat.

His wolf surged forward, claws at the edge of his skin, eyes sharpening.

Mate.

It hit him like a punch. No warning. No preparation. Just truth, absolute and unignorable.

She looked up. Their eyes met.

Green. Startlingly green, like moss and mischief and early spring.

"Hi," she said brightly, holding up a small paper bag like a peace offering. "I brought muffins."

Muffins?

Jace blinked. His heart didn't stutter. His breath didn't hitch. He was alpha, for moon's sake. Steady. Controlled.

But the edges of his world had just tilted, and nothing was where he left it.

He took a slow breath. Pushed down the growl in his throat. Locked the wolf back in

its cage.

“You’re in my office,” he said, the words low and clipped.

Her smile faltered. “Right. Yes. Sorry, I just thought since this was the central archive and I’m technically your assistant?—”

“I said you could work in admin support. Sorting incident reports. Filing. Quietly.”

She rose to her full height, which barely hit his shoulder, but she stood her ground with a tilt to her chin that dared him to keep growling.

“I’ve only been here four hours and haven’t set anything on fire. I’d call that a win.”

Her voice was like her smell, sweet, warm, threaded with chaos.

“I don’t like surprises,” he said, taking a measured step forward. Her scent thickened. The wolf inside him growled softly. “And I don’t like magic that doesn’t stay in its box.”

She blinked up at him, a small crease forming between her brows. “Then you hired the wrong witch.”

He froze.

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Not because she was wrong. But because she wasn't. Not one damn bit.

He didn't know what Calla had been thinking about assigning this woman, thiswitchto his command center.

"I'm Lyra, by the way." She stuck her hand out like they weren't practically circling each other. "Full name Lyra Ravenshade. Chaos witch. Muffin enthusiast. Mildly good at filing."

He didn't take her hand. Couldn't. Touching her felt... dangerous.

She dropped it with a shrug. "Suit yourself."

He watched her turn back to her scrolls, the sway of her skirt, the faint golden glow under her skin when she wasn't focused on hiding it.

Chaos witch.

He'd read the file. Knew she'd left her coven up north under strained circumstances. But the details were vague. A "portal incident" and "unauthorized transfiguration." He'd dismissed her initially, too unpredictable, too messy for his meticulous world. But he had needed someone and Calla had vouched for her.

And now, he had a bigger problem.

Because Lyra Ravenshade was his mate.

And he couldn't claim her.

The town didn't need a distracted alpha. The pack didn't need drama. He didn't need... feelings.

She looked over her shoulder at him, grinning like she knew something he didn't.

He clenched his jaw. "Stay out of the north wing. That's for senior pack members only."

She saluted. "Roger that, Alpha Grumbles."

His eyes narrowed. "What did you just call me?"

"I said I'll keep to the west wing."

She smirked. He scowled.

And the wolf inside him purred.

3

LYRA

Lyra had never known a town to sigh contentedly in its sleep, but Celestial Pines did just that.

She could hear it in the soft rustle of the Whispering Woods when the wind curled down through the pines, and in the way the cobblestone streets exhaled warmth in the early morning, chasing the mist like a sleepy yawn. Even the mailboxes here hummed when touched, like they were happy to be included in someone's daily routine.

“Enchanting little bubble,” Lyra muttered as she padded down Main Street in a pair of cherry-red boots that sparkled slightly every time her heel hit the ground. “Feels like I stepped into a dream that’s had way too much chamomile tea.”

Beside her, Milo the talking cattrotted with an infuriating sense of purpose. Black fur sleek, emerald eyes narrowed in that perpetually judgmental way that made him look like he’d been inconvenienced by existence itself.

“I’m just saying,” Lyra added, side-eyeing him, “you could’ve warned me that the mayor is actually a dryad who grows petunias when she’s lying.”

“I thought it was obvious,” Milo said, his voice crisp and vaguely British. “Also, I’m not your tour guide.”

“You followed me out of the office.”

“You smelled like lemon mist and confusion. I was intrigued.”

Lyra grinned. She couldn’t help it. Two days in, and Celestial Pines already had her heart dancing on tiptoe. It wasn’t perfect, Jace Montgomery still glared at her like she was a misplaced hex but it was theirs, this strange, magical town with its gossiping shopkeepers and coffee that tasted like memories.

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And she wasn't going back. Not to the cold marble halls of her old coven. Not to their rules or judgment or constant attempts to "tidy up" her brand of magic.

Here, no one flinched when her enchanted pen decided to write in cursive on its own. No one told her she was "too much" or "not enough."

They just gave her keys and muffins and a place to belong.

Later that afternoon, Lyra was back at Moonfang Keep, nestled in the dusty archive room with scrolls up to her ears and a cheerful hum on her lips.

The place smelled like oak, ancient magic, and something wild that never quite faded—like pine smoke and lightning. There were wards carved into every archway, some glowing faintly when she passed. But the magic didn't bite. It watched. Curious.

She flicked a charm to unroll a stubborn scroll and leaned in, muttering, "If this turns into a fire elemental again, I swear?—"

"No fire today, I hope," came a familiar voice.

Lyra looked up as Petra, the dryad from logistics, leaned against the doorframe with a cup of something fizzy and green.

"No fire," Lyra confirmed, twirling a lock of hair around her finger. "Just bureaucratic nightmares and scrolls that whisper insults in Latin."

Petra snorted. “That’s the property ledger. It’s cursed. Jace refuses to get rid of it.”

“Why?”

“Tradition.” Petra took a sip. “That and it bit Ezra Wolfe once. Jace said it earned its keep.”

Lyra’s smile faded at the name. She’d only heard whispers, but the rival alpha was already carving out space in her mental worry closet.

“So... you settling in?” Petra asked, kicking off the wall and stepping closer.

“As much as I can. Still trying to figure out which cabinet has the death threats and which one just holds expired permits.”

“The red one’s both.”

“Lovely.”

Petra leaned in with a grin. “So. Be honest. What do you think of the big, broody boss man?”

Lyra coughed on her tea.

Petra’s grin widened. “That bad?”

“It’s not that he’s bad,” Lyra said slowly, trying to find words that didn’t sound like “infuriatingly hot.” “He’s just... intense.”

“Mmhm.”

“And mysterious.”

“Uh huh.”

“And maybe smells like thunder during a summer storm, but that’s neither here nor there.”

Petra laughed, loud and delighted. “Oh, honey. You are doomed.”

Lyra groaned, flopping backward into a cloud of parchment. “He probably thinks I’m a walking magical hazard.”

“Probably,” Petra agreed. “But he hasn’t fired you yet. That’s practically a marriage proposal by Jace standards.”

That earned her a crumpled receipt to the face.

That evening, Callamet Lyra at the Spellbound Sip, the town’s coziest spot for tea, town gossip, and flirtation-flavored coffee.

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They sat in a corner booth with charm-dampening cushions and glowing menus that pulsed with their auras. Lyra's cup shifted from orange zest to lavender honey with a sigh.

"You're mellowing," Calla said approvingly. "Last week, your drink tasted like fireworks and rebellion."

"I'm trying," Lyra said, cheeks flushed. "I like it here. The town's weird, but the good kind of weird. The folks are strange in a way that fits."

"And the boss?"

Lyra wrinkled her nose. "He's... complicated."

Calla's brow lifted.

"He's rigid," Lyra continued. "Quiet. Probably allergic to compliments. Definitely allergic to me. But also... kind of noble? Like he'd throw himself in front of a hex bolt and then grumble about it for a week."

"Sounds like Jace."

"And I think he might be hiding something. Something big." Lyra's voice softened. "There's pain there. I see it in his eyes when he thinks no one's looking. Like he's holding up a whole mountain on his shoulders, and if he shifts an inch, it'll all come down."

Calla's face grew serious. "You always were quick at reading people. He's had it rough. Took over after his father vanished. Packs don't like uncertainty, and Jace... he never got to grieve. Just stepped up and never stepped down."

Lyra's chest ached. "That explains the weight in his stare."

Calla smiled sadly. "Be careful, Lyra."

"I always am," she said, then winced. "Okay, I usually am. Sometimes."

By the time Lyra returned to her little room above the apothecary, the stars were out, and the wind had picked up. She sat on the windowsill with Milo curled in her lap, watching the moon cast silver over the trees.

"You think he likes me?" she whispered.

"Jace Montgomery doesn't even like himself," Milo replied.

"Comforting."

"But he's watching. I feel it."

Lyra leaned her head against the window. Her heart beat a little faster than she wanted to admit.

Something had shifted the moment he looked at her. She hadn't imagined the way the air had thickened. The way her magic had stirred like a cat stretching in sunlight.

Something was coming.

And whatever it was, a part of her hoped it started with a scowl and smelled like pine

smoke.

4

JACE

Jace had once stared down a feral rogue wolf on the verge of shifting mid-market without blinking. He'd walked into a cursed grove alone at sixteen and come back with nothing but a scratch and a scowl. He'd faced dozens of threats, mundane and magical—and handled them with the kind of brutal efficiency that had earned him the loyalty of his pack and the grudging respect of Celestial Pines' supernatural council.

But apparently, he wasn't equipped to handle one chaos witch with a soft laugh and a wardrobe that looked like a spellbook exploded in a thrift shop.

“Ridiculous,” he muttered, flipping through a field report on magical crop disturbances that somehow ended with sentient pumpkins demanding union wages.

He hadn't even realized he was gripping the page too tightly until it tore.

With a sharp sigh, he tossed it aside and shoved to his feet, prowling toward the tall windows of his office. The view was serene, pine trees swaying, the mountains brooding in the distance, and Main Street twinkling with early evening charm—but his focus snagged, as it always did lately, on her.

Lyra.

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Down below in the courtyard, she stood with Petra and Milo, laughing about something. Her head tilted back, curls bouncing, one hand pressed over her stomach like she couldn't breathe from giggling too hard.

And something twisted in his chest.

That laugh had teeth. It dug in and lingered. He'd heard it through stone walls, echoing down the stairwell, like sunshine sneaking through locked shutters.

He turned away sharply.

He didn't have time for this.

He didn't have time for her.

But no matter how deep he buried himself in pack disputes and regional diplomacy, Lyra Ravenshade kept getting past his defenses like her very magic was designed to slip between the cracks.

It had been four days. Four days of her working quietly in his space, not doing anything overtly wrong, if you didn't count the enchanted scroll that briefly started singing sea shanties—but also not doing anything to help him forget the pull.

She was everywhere.

Laughing with Petra. Trading herbal tips with the dryads. Sneaking muffins onto desks like some kind of pastry vigilante.

And always, she smelled like warmth and magic and trouble.

Jace had tried avoiding her. He took alternate hallways. Rescheduled his office hours. Communicated via notes delivered by staff who now raised their brows at him with just enough suspicion to be irritating.

But then he'd catch her humming in the archives, or feel her magic dancing in the air like sunlight through leaves, and suddenly the claws under his skin wouldn't rest.

So he kept his distance. Mostly. Except when absolutely necessary.

"Lyra," he'd barked earlier that morning, stepping just inside the door.

She'd jumped, nearly knocking over a teetering stack of grimoire translations.

"Morning to you, too," she'd mumbled, cheeks flushed.

"You're meant to be sorting incident reports by tier level. That stack's from last year."

"They were nostalgic," she replied, brushing parchment off her lap. "Also, your filing system is aggressively grumpy."

"I'm not interested in color-coded chaos."

She'd smiled, slow and sweet. "Shame. I am."

And then, just like that, she'd gone back to work, all breezy competence and humming mischief.

And he'd stood there too long. Again.

Now, hours later, Jace was back in his office, chair angled toward the fireplace though he didn't care about the warmth. His desk sat untouched. His inbox overflowing. But he wasn't reading field notes or reviewing security rotations.

He was brooding.

Which, fine, he excelled at brooding. Had it down to an art. But this felt... personal.

A knock broke his focus.

Calla Monroe stepped inside like she owned the place, which wasn't technically true but close enough considering she'd helped half the staff with potions or hex reversals at some point. Her wild braid swung over one shoulder, and she carried a satchel that always smelled faintly of sage and secrets.

"Got that tincture you asked for," she said, tossing a small vial on his desk. "For the ward flare-ups near Echo Woods."

"Appreciate it."

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She didn't leave.

He glanced up. "Something else?"

Calla cocked her head. "You've been quieter than usual."

"I didn't realize that was something you noticed."

"I'm observant. Also, Petra's been whispering about your 'new employee situation' like it's a soap opera."

Jace frowned. "It's not a situation."

Calla plopped into the chair across from him, arching a brow. "Then why are you asking Petra to keep an eye on her?"

"I'm not?—"

"You are."

He scrubbed a hand over his face. "It's nothing."

Calla leaned in. "It's not nothing if it's making you glower more than usual. Which is impressive, considering your baseline is 'thundercloud with a jawline.'"

He didn't dignify that with a response.

She waited.

“Fine,” he muttered. “I just need to know if she’s... adjusting. To the town. To the Keep.”

Calla’s eyes sparkled with something dangerously close to amusement. “Why?”

“She’s your cousin.”

“She’s also an adult. And capable. And, from what I’ve seen, probably the best thing to happen to the Keep in ages.”

He stiffened. “You don’t know her work ethic.”

Calla’s gaze softened. “No. But maybe you don’t either.”

Jace looked away.

He didn’t want to admit it, couldn’t admit it—but Lyra unsettled him in ways that had nothing to do with her chaos magic and everything to do with the mate-bond pulsing just under his skin. Every time she was near, his instincts clawed at him. Claim her. Protect her. Touch her.

It wasn’t logical. It wasn’t manageable.

So he buried it. Like he buried everything else that didn’t fit in the neat, cold lines of duty.

Calla rose, brushing nonexistent dust from her trousers. “She’s good for this place. And maybe good for you, too—if you’d pull your head outta your ass long enough to see it.”

He glared. She smirked. And then she was gone.

Jace sat there long after the door clicked shut, staring at the fire until his wolf huffed softly inside him, pacing behind his ribs.

Outside, dusk fell over Celestial Pines like a velvet cloak. The lights in the town flickered to life, glow globes over storefronts, enchanted candles on porches, soft illumination curling around ward stones set in the sidewalks.

And down in the courtyard, Lyra danced with Milo, twirling in circles, making her skirt flare like flower petals. She didn't know he was watching. Didn't know how tightly he was wound.

And she couldn't know the truth clawing beneath his skin.

Because if she did... she'd run.

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And he wasn't sure he'd be able to let her go.

5

LYRA

Lyra believed that magic was a lot like baking—best done with a wink, a little chaos, and a whole lot of butter.

So when she'd spent her Sunday morning whipping up a fresh batch of enchanted muffins for the Moonfang Keep staff, she hadn't expected anything more than a few raised eyebrows and some appreciative chewing. Maybe a happy sigh or two. Certainly not a surprise office enchantment that made Amos think he could speak French. (He could not.)

Milo, naturally, blamed her.

"You infused the batter with emotional frequency," he said, perched on the back of her desk chair like he paid rent. "Did you want everyone to hallucinate their deepest cravings?"

"They weren't hallucinating," Lyra said, brushing a stubborn strand of hair from her cheek as she wiped down the breakroom counter. "They were just... emotionally aligned with baked goods. That's all."

"Petra cried into a blueberry scone because it reminded her of her high school boyfriend."

“She said it was cathartic!”

“Delia tried to resign.”

“She always tries to resign,” Lyra muttered, then sniffed. “Besides, Jace didn’t even eat one.”

“Didn’t stop him from glowering like you’d cursed the coffee pot.”

“He glowers by default.”

“True. But that glower had layers.”

She rolled her eyes and flicked a tea towel at him. “You’re as dramatic as a haunted ouija board.”

He jumped to the floor with a haughty flick of his tail. “And yet, I’m rarely wrong.”

By mid-afternoon, the muffins were mostly gone, and so were most of the staff. The Keep had gone quiet in that lazy, late-day way buildings did when the sun started to stretch golden fingers through the windows and everything felt like it could nap. Lyra hummed as she floated through the archive corridor, levitating a few unsorted scrolls with a flick of her fingers.

“Moonfang Muffin Incident: Minor Chaos, Maximum Flavor,” she whispered, pretending to write headlines in her head.

She rounded the corner to the far study nook, planning to drop off the last of her mood muffins on the table by the windows, when her toe caught on something.

“Milo!”

The cat darted underfoot at exactly the wrong time, sending Lyra stumbling forward with a startled gasp and scrolls flying in all directions. She crashed hard into a solid wall of something warm and immovable.

Arms caught her before she could slide to the ground.

Strong arms.

Warm hands. One on her waist. One at her back.

And just like that, she was nose-to-chest with Jace Montgomery.

“Oh stars,” she breathed, dazed.

He didn’t speak at first. Just held her there, gaze locked on hers, and the rest of the world spun off its axis.

Her heart banged against her ribs.

His eyes were storm-dark. Focused. And too damn close.

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She blinked, lips parted, suddenly aware of everything—the way his hand tightened slightly at her back, the rise and fall of his chest, the scent of him. Woodsmoke. Pine. Something wilder beneath.

“Are you alright?” he asked, his voice low and rough like he hadn’t used it all day.

“Fine,” she said, except her voice came out breathy and traitorous. “Milo tripped me.”

“I noticed.”

He didn’t let go.

And she didn’t move.

The space between them vibrated, tension crackling like live wire. Her fingers were curled into his shirt without realizing it, and his eyes flicked down to her lips just for a moment. A flicker. But she saw it. Felt it.

Something inside her fluttered. Her magic hummed under her skin.

They were standing in a room full of scrolls, tea-scented air, and old magic, but it felt like the center of a storm. Quiet, tight, charged.

Jace leaned in.

Just barely.

So close she could feel the heat of him on her skin.

So close she could taste the kiss in the space between their mouths.

But then he pulled back.

Fast. Like he'd been burned.

His hands dropped, his expression snapped back into neutral, and he took a hard step away.

Lyra blinked at the sudden loss of contact.

"I told you not to let magic wander in the archives," he said stiffly.

"It wasn't magic," she replied, breath still shaky. "It was Milo."

"Same difference."

He turned, expression shuttered, and began gathering the scrolls she'd dropped like nothing had happened. Like they hadn't just been inches from something that would've changed everything.

Lyra dropped her gaze to the floor, trying to gather her dignity with the scattered parchment. Her hands were trembling.

He'd almost kissed her.

And then... he hadn't.

Which, fine. Cool. Totally fine. Who needed oxygen, anyway?

She brushed her hands down her skirt and stood up. “I was just dropping off muffins.”

He didn’t look at her. “You’ve done enough for the day.”

“I didn’t mean to cause chaos,” she said softly, not sure if she was talking about the muffins or the moment they’d nearly shared.

But Jace didn’t answer.

He just handed her the last scroll, his fingers brushing hers for the briefest second, electric—then walked away without another word.

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Lyra stood in the quiet for a long moment after he left, heart still thudding like a drumline in a hurricane.

“I knew it,” Milo whispered from the shadows, tail flicking smugly.

She sighed. “Don’t even start.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“You said everything.”

6

JACE

Jace paced the length of his office with the kind of quiet fury that made most of his wolves clear a room without being asked.

Almost.

He’d almost kissed her.

And not in some calculated, controlled way. No. He’d been inches from her mouth like some hormone-struck pup with no sense of decorum, with no pack watching, with no world to carry on his back. Like it was just them. Just her.

Just her scent in his lungs and the maddening sound of her laugh still echoing in his

ears.

“Damn it,” he muttered, dragging a hand through his hair.

It had barely been a week since Lyra walked into his world like a sunrise dipped in chaos, and already she was burrowed under his skin. She was wild, unpredictable, reckless and worse, she didn’t even feel it. Not the bond. Not the pull.

Not like he did.

Everything in him screamed for her. His wolf paced constantly now, restless and alert, ears pricked toward her every footstep in the Keep. He didn’t need to see her to know where she was, he felt it. A tension in the air. A whisper beneath his skin. Like gravity had rearranged itself around her.

And she... she was oblivious.

She talked to him like he was just her boss. Snapped back when he barked orders. Baked muffins that messed with everyone’s heads. She enchanted scrolls and tripped on cats and didn’t get it. Didn’t see it. The mate-bond that blazed through him like wildfire.

It was unbearable.

Worse, it was humiliating.

His father would’ve seen the weakness. Would’ve torn into him for hesitating. For not claiming what was his. A mate was sacred. Fated. A gift that couldn’t be wasted.

“She’s not meant for me,” Jace muttered to the empty room.

She was a chaos witch. His opposite in every way. Where he was disciplined, she was impulsive. Where he was built of structure and silence, she was all sparkle and sound.

Surely his father would've seen that.

Surely he would've understood.

Or maybe not. Maybe that old bastard would've said the same thing Calla had been hinting at in his office when he asked about her: She's the best thing to happen to this Keep in years, and you're too stubborn to see it.

No. No, he didn't see it.

That was the problem.

The next day brought fog. Thick and clinging, the kind that curled around the mountain and slid through the Keep's wards like ghost-breath. Jace was up before sunrise, patrolling the perimeter himself. He hadn't slept.

Couldn't.

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Every time he shut his eyes, he saw her. Heard that near-breathlessoh starsas she'd stumbled into him. Felt her hands on his chest.

He growled to himself, sharper than the misty wind whipping through the pines.

By mid-morning, the fog still hadn't lifted, and tensions ran high. The magic in the air was twitchy. Prickly. Like the forest knew something was coming and didn't want to share.

Jace stalked through the lower hall of Moonfang Keep, a fresh report in his hand about a shifting anomaly near the eastern grove. The second this week.

He found Lyra in the archive room, again. Always the damn archive. Scrolls spread like confetti, sleeves pushed up, a smudge of ink on her nose.

He stopped in the doorway, heart betraying him with a thump he refused to acknowledge.

“Ravensshade.”

She looked up, startled. “Morning, boss man.”

He ignored the flutter of amusement in her tone.

“You're behind on last week's incident categorization. Delia says the reports are still untagged.”

“I’m working on it.”

“You’ve got three stacks of unprocessed files and half of them are floating.”

She glanced up. “They like hovering. It’s a comfort thing.”

“Magic shouldn’t comfort paperwork,” he snapped, stepping further in. “This isn’t a hobby. You’re not here to cast glitter spells and charm tea kettles. You were hired to organize, not enchant.”

Her smile faded. “Well, good morning to you too.”

His jaw tightened. He didn’t like this. Didn’t like being cold to her. But the alternative which is getting closer, was worse.

Much worse. It would distract him and he didn’t need that. He didn’t need or want her chaos in his life. He had enough to deal with as is.

She huffed, gathering the floating scrolls with a flick of her fingers. “You know, if you ever need to talk to me like an actual person instead of a magical hiccup, I’m all ears.”

“Just do your job,” he muttered, and walked out before her wounded look could root deeper into his chest.

It wasn’t even fifteen minutes later when he felt it.

That pull.

That snap in his gut like a rubber band stretching too far.

She was in danger.

He didn't think. Didn't question it.

He just ran.

Jace found her in the courtyard behind the Keep, crouched near the southern wardstone, arms up as a sudden gust of wild magic crackled around her. Something had snagged the edge of her aura—maybe a ward backlash, maybe a residual pulse from the mist—and it was lashing out.

The force shoved her backward, sending her sprawling into the grass.

He was at her side before she hit the ground.

“Lyra!” His voice was sharp, but his hands were steady—already checking her over, cupping the back of her head, scanning for blood.

She blinked up at him, dazed. “You—how did you?—?”

“Don’t move.”

Her magic shimmered around her like heat off pavement, erratic and humming. Her fingers flexed in the grass. “It—it was the stone. I didn’t touch it, I swear. I was just trying to reinforce the shield. Something pushed back.”

He didn’t answer right away. He couldn’t.

Because the only thing in his mind was mine.

His wolf was clawing beneath his skin again, wild with protectiveness and rage and the need to bury his face in her neck and make sure she was still breathing.

Lyra stared at him, eyes wide and soft and questioning. “How did you know?”

Jace pulled away.

Cold. Sharp. Controlled.

“I didn’t.”

Her brows knit. “But you came running?—”

“Be more careful,” he said, standing. “You could’ve torn the wards wide open. That stone’s tied to the Grove. It reacts when provoked.”

“I wasn’t?—”

“You were careless.”

Her face paled. “I was trying to help.”

He didn’t let himself soften. Didn’t let himself stay. Not when his hands still tingled from touching her. Not when his wolf still howled in his chest like he’d nearly lost everything.

“Just... stay inside,” he muttered. “Let someone else handle the wards next time that doesn't destroy everything they touch.”

Then he turned and walked away before the tremble in her voice could shatter the walls he’d spent years building.

7

LYRA

Lyra had always been good at reading people.

Even when she was a kid, nose deep in hex theory and flower-dusted spellbooks, she could tell when her coven elders were lying through their teeth. She’d known when an apology wasn’t really an apology. She’d known when love was conditional, and when kindness came wrapped in expectations.

So she trusted her gut.

And right now? Her gut was waving red flags and tossing glitter in all directions when it came to Jace Montgomery.

She stared into the frothy depths of her tea at The Spellbound Sip, elbows propped on

the table, fingers drumming against a muffin plate she hadn't touched. Across from her, Calla watched her like she was deciding whether to hand over a comforting hug or a truth potion.

"He was cold," Lyra said finally, breaking the silence. "Not just annoyed—I mean cold. One minute he's holding me like I'm made of glass and growling like I'm the last biscuit at a family reunion, and the next he's throwing shade like I caused a magical apocalypse."

Calla raised a brow. "Did you?"

"No!" She paused. "Well. Mostly no."

Calla sipped her herbal blend, eyes thoughtful. "You want me to lie to you or tell you the truth?"

"I want you to tell me why my boss acts like I'm some dangerous temptation he can't afford to look at but also won't leave alone."

Calla smiled slowly. "So... the truth then."

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Lyra groaned and slumped back in her chair. “Look, I didn’t come here to get emotionally scolded over tea. I came to ask about shifters. More specifically, wolf shifters. More specifically than that—Moonfang lore.”

Calla leaned forward, resting her chin on her fist. “That’s a lot of specificity for someone who just said she didn’t cause a magical apocalypse.”

“I’ve been reading,” Lyra muttered. “In the Keep’s archives. Old bonding lore. Mate stuff. There’s some weird holes in the records, and a few things didn’t translate well, but?—”

“You think Jace is your mate?” Calla asked bluntly.

Lyra sputtered. “No! Maybe? I don’t know! That’s the thing. I’m a witch, remember? We don’t get mate bonds. At least not like that. My coven was all about soul alignments and magical compatibility charts and ‘is your aura clashing with his?’ tea readings.”

Calla chuckled. “So no wolf stuff.”

“None,” Lyra said. “And now this... this thing with Jace—he’s tense around me. Not the normal grumpy-pants alpha kind of tense. More like if-you-touch-me-I-might-snarl tense.”

“He saved you,” Calla said softly.

Lyra looked away. “Yeah. And then told me to be more careful like I’d run off with a

torch and a map to chaos town.”

Calla was quiet for a long beat.

“Do you want the mystical version, or the practical version?”

Lyra leaned in. “Both. Hit me with the full moon-shaped truth.”

Calla nodded. “Okay. So—wolves, especially alphas, imprint through scent and energy. Their bond—when it forms—is undeniable. It’s not subtle. When a shifter meets their true mate, their instincts go into overdrive. It’s like their soul knows, even if the other person doesn’t.”

Lyra's stomach tightened. “Even if the other person is a witch?”

“It’s rare,” Calla admitted. “But not impossible. Especially here, under the Moonlit Veil. The magic here... it likes balance. And it loves drama.”

Lyra exhaled sharply. “So if—if—he felt the bond... wouldn’t he have said something?”

“Not necessarily. Especially not Jace.”

“Why?”

Calla tilted her head, eyes sad and fond at the same time. “Because Jace carries his duty like armor. Since his father vanished, he’s held this entire town on his shoulders. He doesn’t let people in because he’s afraid if he slips up, everything will fall apart.”

“And I’m a walking magical oops,” Lyra muttered.

“No,” Calla said, firm. “You’re magic that doesn’t fit in a box. And maybe that terrifies him.”

Lyra sat back, hands curling around her mug. Her chest felt tight. Not painful—just full. Like too many feelings were competing for space.

“I felt something,” she whispered. “When he caught me the other day. It was like... like time hiccuped. And when he looked at me...”

“His wolf saw you,” Calla said softly. “And that’s not something you can unsee.”

“But he pulled away.”

“Because he doesn’t want to feel it,” Calla said. “And maybe because he’s scared you won’t feel it back.”

Lyra looked up sharply.

“I’m just saying,” Calla added with a shrug. “He’s not used to people choosing him. Not for him. You may be the first person to see past the alpha and the duty.”

Lyra swallowed, throat dry.

“Well that’s deeply inconvenient,” she muttered.

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Calla grinned. “Most good things are.”

That night, Lyra couldn't sleep.

She lay curled in her bed above the apothecary, staring at the twinkle charms strung along her windowsill. The town outside was quiet, cloaked in moonlight and the soft shimmer of magical wards.

Her thoughts raced like spell sparks.

She kept seeing his face. That look he'd had when she'd fallen. The fury. The fear. The protectiveness. It hadn't been professional. It hadn't been just alpha duty.

It was the kiss they didn't share. The heat in his gaze. The way he'd lingered just a breath too long.

She pressed a hand to her chest, feeling the echo of something that hadn't even happened and still managed to change her.

If Jace Montgomery was her mate...

He didn't want to be.

But if he wasn't...

Why did she feel like her magic leaned toward him without asking?

JACE

Jace sat at the end of the long oak council table, arms crossed, jaw set, the weight of old magic pressing down like a second skin.

The council chambers of Celestial Pines weren't grand. No glittering chandeliers or marble floors. Just stone walls covered in living moss, a table older than the town itself, and ward runes etched in every wooden groove—glowing faintly with the heartbeat of the Veil.

Hazel Fairweather, dryad elder and unofficial oracle of bad timing, leaned forward with flowers blooming from her braid and worry blooming in her gaze. "Ezra's wolves were spotted again near the northern ridge. This time closer. More confident."

"Let them circle," Jace said evenly. "We've fortified the wards. They won't get through."

"Confidence like that gets people dead," muttered Marciel Drake, the town's oldest vampire and unofficial tavern therapist. "And Ezra Wolfe's not one to bluff."

"He's not a fool either," Jace replied. "If he wanted to fight, he'd have done it already."

Hazel frowned. "He's doing something worse. He's planting seeds."

Jace didn't answer right away. Instead, he leaned back in his chair, the carved wolf heads at his elbows cool under his hands. Every word Hazel said carried truth, but he couldn't show concern. Not now. Not here.

He wasn't just Jace in this room.

He was Alpha Montgomery.

"Ezra's been circling this town for three years," he said at last, tone clipped. "We haven't bent. We won't start now."

Hazel's green eyes narrowed. "He's not circling anymore, Alpha. He's stalking."

The room fell quiet.

And Jace couldn't stop the echo of her voice from yesterday, Lyra's voice, breathless and confused after he'd pulled her from the wards.

You saved me. How did you know where I was?

He hadn't answered then. He couldn't. Because the truth that he felt he was too dangerous to admit, even to himself.

Not when Ezra Wolfe had a nose for blood and weakness, and right now, Lyra Ravenshade was both.

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After the meeting, Jace stalked through the Keep's back corridor, jaw even tighter, breath shallow. The scent of cedar oil and old parchment followed him, normally grounding, but now it just prickled.

Ezra.

Damn him.

He'd once called Ezra brother. Not by blood, but bond. The way only alpha-born shifters could, raised alongside one another in rites and training. They'd fought side by side in the Old Trials, bled together in the Echo Glen skirmishes when the wards faltered. Once, they'd even laughed under starlight with matching bruises and broken ribs.

But Ezra had always wanted more.

More control. More power. Less diplomacy. Less peace.

When Jace's father vanished and the mantle passed down, Ezra had shown up within a month—smiling, smooth, full of suggestions about how to “strengthen the Pack” by dissolving the Moonlit Pact and claiming surrounding territories by force.

Jace said no.

Ezra smiled, nodded... and left.

The following year, shifters began disappearing. Rumors of rogue gatherings.

Symbols burned into trees. Tensions in the council. Ezra's shadow stretched longer with every full moon.

Now, he was circling again. Like a vulture.

And the timing couldn't be worse.

Because now...Jace had something Ezra could take.

He turned the corner toward the main hall just in time to hear laughter echo down from the courtyard.

He froze. He'd recognize that laugh anywhere.

Lyra.

He moved on instinct, barely thinking, boots silent against the old stone floor. Through the arched window, he saw her near the central fountain, head thrown back, curls bouncing as she laughed at something Luca, one of his younger enforcers, was saying.

Jace's wolf snarled.

Luca was leaning in too close. Smiling too much. His hand brushing her elbow like he had a right.

Jace stepped outside before he could talk himself out of it.

"Luca," he said flatly.

Both of them turned. Lyra's smile faltered slightly, and Luca stiffened like he'd just

been caught sniffing the alpha's mate.

Not that she was. Not officially.

“Alpha,” Luca said, nodding.

“You’ve got patrol rotation in fifteen.”

Luca looked at the sky, blinked. “Thought that was later?—”

“Do you want me to make it ten?”

Luca mumbled something about checking gear and practically sprinted off.

Lyra raised a brow. “Well, that wasn’t subtle.”

Jace exhaled through his nose. “He shouldn’t be distracting you.”

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“From what? My job reorganizing scrolls that bite and sorting through magic-induced complaint forms?”

His lips twitched. Just barely. “Still.”

She tilted her head. “You always growl when you’re jealous?”

He stiffened. “I wasn’t jealous.”

She smiled, small and knowing. “You sure about that?”

He didn’t answer. Didn’t trust himself to.

Because the truth was, watching Luca laugh with her had lit something volatile in his chest. A primitive thing that didn’t care about diplomacy or politics or the Moonlit Pact. It only cared about her.

Her laughter.

Her being his.

But she wasn’t.

Not yet.

Not unless he claimed her. And claiming her would mean pulling her into the storm Ezra was conjuring at the border.

It would mean vulnerability. Risk.

And Jace Montgomery didn't do risk when it came to hearts. Not anymore.

"Stay away from the northern ridge," he said suddenly. "Until further notice."

Her brow furrowed. "Because of Ezra?"

He didn't confirm it. Couldn't.

"I've heard the rumors, I can han—"

"Just do it. Please."

She searched his face for something he didn't know how to give.

Then she nodded, slowly. "Alright."

He turned to leave, but she spoke again, softer this time. "You don't have to protect me from everything, you know."

"I'm not."

She stepped toward him. "You are. But you don't have to lie about it."

Jace swallowed hard. "Go back inside, Lyra."

He walked away, because if he stayed—if he saw the look in her eyes a second longer—he might do something reckless.

Like tell her the truth. That his heart had already claimed her.

And his wolf had known it from the moment she'd smiled and said, Hi, I brought muffins.

9

LYRA

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The bouquet was waiting for her on the front desk.

Lyra blinked at the bundle of pale blue blossoms nestled in a crystal-wrapped vase, their petals shimmering with a faint glow like starlight trapped in bloom. Tiny flecks of silver dust shimmered in the air above them, drifting lazily like sleepy fireflies.

“What in the—?” she murmured, setting her teacup down with a soft clink on the side table.

“Delivery came just after sunrise,” Delia called from the hallway, arms full of paperwork. “Didn’t catch who dropped it. No note. But the magic’s stable. Mostly.”

“Mostly?” Lyra asked, raising a brow.

Delia shrugged without stopping. “Well, it’s humming.” She headed to the back to make copies.

Lyra leaned closer. The scent was intoxicating—cool and a little wild, like rain on a moonlit meadow. Moonflowers. Rare. Magical. They bloomed only under certain lunar cycles, and only if coaxed with the right energy. And these weren’t just any moonflowers. These glowed. Their magic was soft, quiet, almost romantic.

Her heart gave a traitorous flutter.

Was this...?

No. It couldn’t be.

Could it?

She glanced over her shoulder toward the north wing, where Jace's office brooded in dignified silence. He hadn't spoken to her much today. Or yesterday, really. Just that clipped warning about the northern ridge and a look that had lingered too long to mean nothing. But he hadn't scowled. He hadn't barked. And... maybe this was his way of saying something?

Maybe Calla was right.

"Don't touch that."

Milo's voice cut through her thoughts like cold water.

She turned to find the black cat perched on the ledge above the doorway, ears pinned flat, tail flicking like an angry metronome.

"I—what? They're just flowers."

"They're not just anything," he growled, leaping down with unnatural grace. "Step back."

Lyra frowned, setting the vase gently on the reception counter. "You're being dramatic."

"I'm being cautious. Which, considering your track record, should be my full-time job."

She folded her arms, lips twitching. "They're pretty. Magical moonflowers. Probably enchanted to smell appealing. Not like it's a death hex."

Milo sniffed the bouquet, then recoiled, fur puffing.

“Oh, that’s not good,” she muttered.

“Definitely not from your scowly alpha,” Milo hissed.

Her heart twisted. “You’re sure?”

“Jace’s scent would be all over it. Protective. Possessive. Pine and storm. This...” He sniffed again, nose wrinkling. “Smells like predator and rot covered up with roses. That’s Ezra Wolfe.”

Lyra felt her stomach drop. “What?”

Milo leapt onto the counter, glaring up at her. “You heard me. That smug, silver-tongued snake left you a magicalcalling card. And if he sent it to yourwork, he knows exactly where you are.”

She took a shaky step back, the sweet scent turning bitter in her throat. “But I don’t evenknowhim. I’ve never met Ezra Wolfe.”

Milo stared. “That’s theproblem, muffin. You shouldn’t be on his radar. And yet?—”

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Lyra bit her lip, thoughts tumbling too fast. “Why would he send me anything?”

“Because he’s calculating. Dangerous. And from what I gather, he’s not used to hearing no.”

Lyra dropped onto the bench by the front desk, the edges of the vase glowing a little brighter as if reacting to her pulse. She chewed the inside of her cheek, voice barely above a whisper.

“Everyone in town gossips about him. I didn’t think it was that bad.”

“What do you know?”

“Just whispers. Petra said he’s got charm that turns to poison if you get too close. Delia said he tried to cozy up to the council years ago, then disappeared when Jace took over. He’s been circling ever since, looking for cracks in the Veil.”

She looked at Milo. “But this? Flowers? Why me?”

The cat sat beside her, tail curling. “Maybe because you’re his weakness.”

She stilled. “You mean Jace.”

Milo said nothing, which was louder than any answer.

She let out a slow breath, heart pounding now for different reasons. “I should tell him.”

“Yes,” Milo said without hesitation.

“But... what if he thinks I’m doing it for attention?” she asked, voice tight. “He already sees me as a nuisance half the time.”

“He sees you,” Milo corrected. “Whether he wants to or not.”

Lyra shook her head. “This’ll just make things worse. He’s barely looking me in the eye as it is. If he thinks Ezra’s sniffing around...” Her voice caught. “He’ll push me away. To protect me, or the pack. Or both. He might even fire me.”

“Or,” Milo said dryly, “he’ll go alpha-feral and rip Ezra’s throat out.”

She groaned. “Exactly. And then I’ll have to explain to the council that it’s because of some damned glowing flowers.”

“So what, then?” Milo asked. “You ignore it?”

She stood, brushing off her skirt, eyes hardening. “I deal with it. Quietly. My way.”

Milo grunted. “That’s never ended in disaster before.”

She arched a brow. “You haveverylittle faith in me for someone who keeps napping on my pillow.”

“I’m your designated emotional support cryptid,” he said with a sniff. “Comes with the sass.”

She glanced at the bouquet again. Her chest still ached with the idea that maybe, for just a second, she’d thought they were from Jace.

She turned and opened the small closet beside the desk, grabbing an old stasis jar. With a muttered incantation, she stuffed the bouquet inside and sealed it shut with a rune.

“Evidence,” she said, mostly to herself. “Not a message.”

Then she tucked it under the desk, right behind the box labeled “Office Complaints – Magical Only,” and walked back toward the archives.

But her heart wasn’t light anymore.

And the next time she passed Jace in the hallway and he didn’t speak, she didn’t try to get his attention.

Because if he wouldn’t see her...

She’d have to figure out why everyone else was starting to.

10

JACE

Jace was halfway down the west wing corridor when his nose caught it.

A scent like smoke laced with rot and charm—too slick, too cold to belong in Moonfang Keep. His body went still. Every muscle locked, instincts bristling beneath his skin like needles.

Ezra.

The scent trailed like a snake into the archive wing. Inside, the air hummed with magic, low and nervous. Jace's pulse didn't spike, he didn't allow it—but his wolf surged, ears pinned, hackles rising.

He shouldn't be here.

Jace stepped around the corner just in time to hear her laugh—soft, a little uncertain.

Lyra.

He moved faster then, silent and precise, bootfalls muffled by instinct. The door to the filing room was half-ajar. The light inside glowed golden, curling through her curls as she stood with a file in one hand and a tight, polite smile on her lips.

Across from her stood Ezra Wolfe, calm as sin, leaning against a shelf like he

belonged there.

And Jace saw red.

He didn't charge in. That would be foolish. Ezra lived to provoke. Jace wasn't giving him the satisfaction.

But the moment Ezra's eyes flicked over Lyra's form, lingering with appreciation Jace didn't bother hiding his fury about—he stepped inside.

“Ezra.”

Lyra jumped slightly, her head whipping toward the door. Ezra just smiled.

“Alpha Montgomery,” Ezra said, like it was a greeting at a garden party. “Was wondering when you'd pop in.”

Jace didn't look at Lyra. Not yet. Not when his wolf was already pacing behind his ribs, growling low and constant.

“You have no business here,” Jace said evenly.

Ezra gestured toward the files. “Just dropping off some old council records. Council asked me to pass them along since I was in the area.”

His eyes glittered. “Didn't realize your staff was so... welcoming.”

Lyra looked between them, confusion knitting her brows. “He said he was returning documents. I didn't know he?—”

“You don't need to explain,” Jace snapped, eyes still locked on Ezra.

Ezra smiled wider, pushing off the shelf and strolling past them both with the easy grace of a predator who didn't fear being bitten. "Nice to meet you, Lyra," he said, voice velvet-wrapped poison. "I look forward to chatting more soon."

Then he was gone, and the silence he left behind was worse than his presence.

Lyra stepped forward, arms crossed. "Okay. First of all, I didn't know who he was. Secondly, what wasthat?"

Jace kept his tone flat. "He shouldn't be here."

"You said that. Loudly. But he didn't do anything."

"He doesn't belong here."

"I didn't invite him."

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He turned to her, eyes hard. “You should’ve known better than to talk to him.”

Her mouth fell open. “Excuse me?”

“He’s dangerous, Lyra. Manipulative. Every word out of his mouth is calculated.”

“I didn’t ask him to flirt, Jace,” she said, color rising in her cheeks. “He walked in with documents. I was doing my job.”

“He’s got an agenda. He always does.”

“And you think I can’t see through that?” she snapped, stepping in closer. “You think I’m that naïve?”

He stiffened, regret flashing but he didn’t let it show.

“I think you don’t understand who he is.”

“Maybe because no one’s telling me!” Her voice cracked slightly. “You bark orders, scowl every time someone talks to me, but you won’t actually say what’s going on. You get furious when I breathe in the same room as another man, but won’t talk to me.”

She stared at him, eyes wet and furious. “Do you hate me, Jace? Because that’s what it feels like. Like you hate that I’m here. Hate that I exist.”

“I don’t—” His voice cracked. He looked away.

She shook her head, stepping back now. Guarded. “Then what is this? Why can’t you just say whatever it is you clearly aren’t saying?”

Jace clenched his fists. “You wouldn’t understand.”

“Try me.”

He didn’t move. Couldn’t.

So she let out a bitter laugh. “Right. Thought so.”

She turned, shoulders squared, chin high—but her hands trembled.

And it broke something in him.

“Ezra doesn’t want peace,” he said, his voice hoarse. “He’s trying to unravel the Moonlit Pact from the inside. He’s recruiting. Testing wards. And if he’s suddenly interested in you, it’s not innocent. It’s strategy.”

Lyra flinched, pain flickering in her eyes. “So I’m a pawn. Got it.”

“I didn’t mean it like that.”

“No, I think you did.”

He exhaled sharply, tension bleeding from his posture, replaced by something quieter. Defeated.

“Go home, Lyra,” he said finally.

She blinked. “What?”

“You don’t need to be here right now. Just... take the day.”

Her voice was barely a whisper. “Are you firing me?”

“No,” he said, already turning away. “I’m protecting both of us right now.”

Then he walked out, leaving her standing there—hurt and confused.

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LYRA

Lyra stood frozen in the corridor long after Jace had vanished down the hall, the echo of his retreating footsteps stamping something bitter across her chest.

Go home, Lyra.

He hadn't yelled.

He hadn't snapped.

But somehow, that cold, clipped sentence hurt worse than any shouted command.

She stared down at her hands, still faintly tingling from the pulse of frustration that rolled through her like a tidal spell on the brink of breaking. She'd tried. She'd asked. She'd let herself be vulnerable, something she didn't often allow, and he'd shut her out—again.

No answers. No truths.

Just distance.

Again.

Her eyes stung, but she blinked fast and furious, jaw tightening as heat bloomed in her throat.

She wasn't going home.

She was going to his office.

The trek from the archive wing to the alpha's office was short but felt endless. Every click of her boots echoed with righteous fury. Witches were taught to handle emotions delicately, to wrap chaos in control. But Lyra had never been very good at holding in magic or feelings.

Today, she wasn't going to try.

She didn't bother knocking.

The door creaked open on its own with a gentle magical prod. Jace stood at the far end of the room, back turned, shoulder muscles tight beneath his dark henley. He was staring out the tall window like the fog outside had secrets worth memorizing.

He didn't turn when she entered.

"Still here?" he said, voice like gravel dragged across steel.

"I don't take orders from you when they're wrapped in bullheaded pride," Lyra snapped.

Now he turned. His gaze locked on hers, sharp and unreadable.

"Lyra—"

"No," she cut in, storming across the room until she stood just beyond his reach. "You don't get to dismiss me like I'm a gnat buzzing too close to your perfect little bubble. Not when you've spent the past two weeks growling at every man who so

much as breathes the same air as me. Not when you—you—keep starting this invisible fire and then acting like I'm the one who lit the match."

He didn't speak, but his jaw clenched hard.

"I've tried to be patient," she continued, voice trembling. "Tried to figure out if I did something wrong. If I imagined the tension. The almost-kiss. The way you held me when the ward flared. But then you push me away, again and again, and I'm left wondering if I'm just some kind of cosmic joke to you."

"Lyra—"

"Don't," she said, one finger raised. "Unless you're actually going to say something real. Because I've had it. I deserve more than a boss who barks when I talk to someone, then sends me home when I don't know why he's looking at me like I'm both the storm and the shelter."

The room pulsed with magic, hers, wild and warm, spilling from her skin like steam. The bond between them vibrated, undeniable and heavy, like fate had lit a fuse between their hearts and was just waiting for one of them to ignite.

He looked like he might.

For a moment, she saw it.

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The truth. Raw and jagged in his eyes. A breath from confession.

But then it was gone. Buried beneath that stoic alpha mask again.

He crossed his arms. “This isn’t about us.”

Her heart cracked. “So there is an us.”

He didn’t reply.

“I see,” she said quietly. “Well, let me make something crystal clear, Alpha Montgomery.”

He flinched at the use of his title from her lips.

“If you’re not wolf or man enough to be honest about what’s going on—between us, in your head, whatever twisted thing you’re wrestling with—then you don’t get to butt into my personal life. You don’t get to scowl at anyone who smiles at me, or warn me off like I’m some fragile little thing you don’t even want.”

He stayed silent, but his eyes, those storm-colored eyes—tracked every word like they were arrows headed straight for his heart.

“And I’m not doing this with you anymore,” she finished. “Not until you figure out whether you actually want me in your life, or just like the control of pretending you don’t.”

She turned.

Walked toward the door without looking back. But before she stepped through it, she paused.

Her voice was low and tired. “You can be as closed off as you want. But don’t lie to yourself and pretend this doesn’t matter. Because it does. And maybe it always did.”

Then she left, shutting the door behind her with a quiet finality.

Lyra didn’t cry.

She didn’t rage, either.

She walked slowly through the Keep, ignoring the way people turned as she passed, ignoring Milo’s shadow weaving at her heels like he was waiting for her to fall apart.

She didn’t. Not this time. Because it wasn’t heartbreak she felt.

It was grief. Quiet and thick and rising.

She hadn’t asked for him to want her. She hadn’t expected it, not truly. But she had expected him to be honest. And that was where it hurt.

That a man who commanded a whole town couldn’t even look her in the eye and admit he felt something when she touched his hand. That someone with a wolf soul couldn’t find the words to tell her why it mattered that Ezra talked to her or looked at her for longer than a blink.

She stopped halfway down the courtyard steps, closing her eyes.

She wasn't a fragile spellbook. She wasn't someone who broke easy. But even witches had limits.

And today, he'd found hers.

12

JACE

Jace wasn't used to regret.

Regret was for men who acted without thinking, wolves who lost control. Alphas weren't afforded the luxury. They acted. Led. Endured.

But this morning? Regret was a dull ache under his ribs, a weight pressing at the base of his throat.

He hadn't meant to hurt her. Not like that.

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She'd left his office with fire in her voice and pain in her eyes, and he'd let her go. Stood there like a damn coward while she told him everything he already knew—he was pushing her away. Hurting her. And for what? So he could pretend he was still in control of this thing—this bond that tugged at him every time she laughed, every time she walked into a room and made the walls feel warmer.

He ran a hand through his dark, almost black hair and paced his office, boots thudding dully against the old pine floors. The morning sun filtered through the tall windows in soft gold sheets, but it didn't warm the place. It couldn't reach him today.

“Just apologize,” he muttered to himself, dragging a palm down his jaw. “Tell her she's right. That you're scared. That she matters.”

But his chest clenched at the thought.

Because once he said it—once he opened that door—there would be no closing it again. No pretending the mate bond didn't exist. No denying that his world, his pack, his future had changed the second Lyra Ravenshade walked into Moonfang Keep in that ridiculous sweater and asked if he wanted a muffin.

He exhaled sharply and turned toward the door, only to freeze at the sound of voices just beyond it.

Reception.

“—phone call for you,” Delia said, her tone bland in that way she used when she wanted someone to know shewasjudging them but alsowouldn'tbe caught dead

saying it aloud.

Lyra answered, voice muffled but unmistakable. “Hello?”

Jace didn’t mean to eavesdrop.

Truly.

But the second he heard his voice, smooth, polished, wrong—every hair on Jace’s body stood on end.

“Miss Ravenshade,” Ezra drawled, “hope I’m not disturbing your morning.”

Jace’s hands curled into fists.

Lyra didn’t sound pleased. “This line’s for Keep business.”

“I like to think of this as... diplomatic outreach. Celestial Pines is small, and I’d hate to let politics get in the way of good company.”

Jace moved closer to the door, silent as a shadow.

“I’m flattered,” Lyra said, tone polite but cool. “But I have a lot to catch up on after yesterday.”

“You work too hard. That’s Alpha Montgomery’s influence, no doubt.”

“Well, he runs a tight ship.”

A soft, charismatic laugh that made Jace want to rip Ezra’s throat out came over the phone.

“I’m sure. Well, seeing as you’re so busy, would you like to have dinner tonight and continue our conversation?”

“Tonight I’ve already got plans,” she added, cutting him off gently. “I’m spending the evening with my cousin. We’ve had it scheduled.”

A pause.

Then Ezra’s voice again, quieter, tinged with something oily. “Another time, then. I do hope you are enjoying the flowers I sent you as well.”

Flowers?Jace snarled to himself.

“I appreciate them. I do have to go though. Have a good day.”

Click.

Jace exhaled, slow and controlled.

The red haze in his mind had started to lift the second she’d declined. But not by much.

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Because Ezra knew her number. Because Ezraknew she worked here. And because Ezra was circling, closer and bolder, like a wolf who'd scented blood and was waiting for the right moment to strike.

Jace stepped away from the door, chest tight. His wolf was clawing beneath the surface, pacing restlessly.

Lyra had handled it with grace. She hadn't flirted. She hadn't accepted. But she hadn't told Jace about the flowers. She hadn't told him Ezra had been sniffing around.

Because she didn't trust him. Because he hadn't earned it.

He turned sharply toward the far corner of the office where a small brass bell sat on a ledge—a direct-call enchantment to his beta, Logan.

He struck it once. A soft chimerang through the room, and moments later, the door creaked open.

Logan stepped inside, one brow already raised. "You rang?"

"I want eyes on Ezra," Jace said. "Discreet. Round-the-clock. He's working something, and I want to know what."

Logan frowned. "You think he's breaking Pact?"

"No," Jace said tightly. "Not yet. But he's testing the edges. I can feel it."

“Council’s already keeping tabs.”

“They’re not keeping them close enough.”

Logan nodded slowly, then studied Jace a beat longer. “This about the call Lyra just took?”

Jace’s eyes flicked toward him.

Logan shrugged. “Delia might’ve... mumbled something on her way past the breakroom.”

Jace didn’t reply.

“Look, Alpha,” Logan said gently, “you don’t have to be psychic to see it. You’re twisted up over her. It’s obvious. Even to the cubs.”

“This isn’t about her.”

“Sure,” Logan said dryly. “You want me to also start tailing anyone who looks at her sideways, or just Ezra for now?”

Jace didn’t rise to the bait.

Logan sighed, rubbed the back of his neck. “She’s strong, Jace. And smart. And yeah, probably not the ‘safe’ choice. But when has anything worth it ever been easy for you?”

Jace didn’t answer.

Logan waited. Then, with a slight nod, turned to go.

“I’ll keep eyes on him.”

The door clicked shut behind him.

Jace sank into the chair behind his desk and stared out the window, hands still clenched. The fog from earlier was burning off now, sunlight breaking through like some damn metaphor he didn’t want.

Lyra had made her choice for tonight.

Not Ezra.

Not him, either.

And maybe that was the problem.

He wasn't giving her a reason to.

13

LYRA

The glowstones at The Spellbound Sip shimmered in shades of amethyst and indigo, casting lazy, pulsing light across the café's old stone walls. Music drifted through the air—half-charmed and half-chaotic—as the town's first-ever karaoke night kicked off with a slightly off-key dryad duo warbling an old moonfolk lullaby.

Lyra sank into the plush booth beside Calla, her shoulders finally starting to relax for the first time in days. A mug of cinnamon-laced cider warmed her hands. The scent of baked apples and piney rosemary twined with the hum of background spells, everything cozy and just a little bit wild—the perfect recipe for forgetting that your boss was emotionally constipated and your life might be turning into a magical rom-com with extra brooding.

"I needed this," she said, tilting her head back. "You have no idea."

Calla smirked over her glass of sparkling potion wine. "Oh, I have every idea. You practically teleported here."

Lyra groaned. "Don't tempt me. I almost did."

"Well, I'm glad you didn't," Calla said. "The last time you blinked mid-emotion, we lost half the potted plants."

“They attacked me first.”

“They were orchids.”

Lyra grinned, but it didn’t quite reach her eyes. Calla, ever the perceptive cousin, leaned in, voice softer now. “Still thinking about him?”

“No,” Lyra said immediately. “Yes. Maybe. Definitely.”

Calla reached across the table and squeezed her hand. “He’s an idiot.”

Lyra sighed. “A handsome, complicated, emotionally repressed idiot.”

“That’s the worst kind.”

Lyra sipped her cider and let the warmth anchor her. “I told him off. Stood my ground. Thought I’d feel better.”

“And you don’t?”

“I feel... raw.” She shrugged. “Like I set a boundary and now I’m standing on the wrong side of it, watching him pretend it doesn’t matter.”

“He’ll come around,” Calla said. “Or he won’t. Either way, you’re still you. That’s the part that matters.”

Lyra nodded, letting the words settle. For once, she wasn’t in the mood to chase understanding or make excuses. Tonight, she just wanted to sing.

She leaned back and scanned the crowd. Familiar faces filled the café—Petra dancing barefoot in a corner with glowing bangles on her wrists, Amos the vampire arguing

with the enchanted jukebox, and Delia sitting alone at the counter pretending to read a ledger while very clearly judging everyone's song choices.

Just as she started to smile again, the door creaked open—and the air changed.

Jace walked in like he didn't know how.

Tall, commanding, visibly uncomfortable in a space where magic fizzed through the air like soda bubbles. His dark shirt stretched across his shoulders, his jaw sharper than usual, and his expression... unreadable.

Lyra's heart did something traitorous.

Calla's eyebrows lifted. "Well, well. Look who the Veil dragged in."

"Don't," Lyra whispered, suddenly feeling like she needed to fan herself with a coaster.

"I'm just saying," Calla said, "when a man who never leaves his office shows up at karaoke night, there's usually a reason."

Lyra didn't reply.

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Because he was walking toward them now.

Not storming. Not brooding. Just... moving. Steady and unhurried. Like he belonged. Even though he clearly didn't believe he did.

"Evening," he said when he reached their table, voice lower than usual, like he wasn't sure if he was interrupting or trespassing.

Calla, bold as ever, waved a hand. "Pull up a chair, Alpha. We don't bite."

He hesitated.

Calla winked. "She might. I'm polite."

Lyra nearly choked on her cider.

Jace didn't look at her. Not directly. But his voice was smoother than she expected when he said, "I'll buy your next round. Least I can do for interrupting girls' night."

"You're definitely interrupting," Calla said. "But we'll allow it."

Lyra couldn't stop watching him.

Not when he flagged down the server and ordered their drinks like it was something he did all the time. Not when his hand brushed the back of her chair briefly, and her magic flared in her fingertips, hot and startled.

He didn't say anything else. Just sat nearby, posture alert but not defensive.

Like he was trying.

And for the first time, she wasn't sure whether to be annoyed or impressed.

Probably both.

An hour later, the café buzzed with music and laughter. Lyra nursed her second cider—more spice than bite—and found herself watching the small stage more than usual.

"I should go up there," she muttered.

Calla perked up. "Do it."

"I was joking."

"I wasn't."

Lyra chewed her lip. "I could charm the mic a little. Give the song a little... sizzle."

Calla smirked. "Chaos witch karaoke. The crowd's not ready."

Lyra set her drink down and stood. "Well, I didn't come here to blend in."

As she stepped onto the stage, murmurs rippled through the room. She heard someone whisper her name, caught Milo darting between tables like a smug little shadow.

She felt Jace's gaze land on her.

Heavy. Intense. Like his eyes had weight and heat and memory.

The lights dimmed slightly, magic tuning itself to her presence.

The mic hummed with her touch.

She sang.

It wasn't flashy. Not loud. But it was real.

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Low and smoky, a melody spun from stardust and half-healed hearts. The kind of song that wound its way through bone and breath, curling in the chest and refusing to leave.

She weaved a little magic into it—just enough to stir the air, to let her voice shimmer and bend. She saw Petra wipe her eyes. Delia's ledger dropped to the table. Even Amos stopped fiddling with the jukebox.

Jace looked like he'd forgotten how to breathe.

He didn't move. Didn't blink.

Just watched her like she was a spell he didn't understand but desperately wanted to.

And when the last note faded, and the lights came back, and applause burst like bubbles around her.

He was still staring.

And Lyra, though not wanting to admit it, was pleased with herself and happy her chaos affected him that much.

14

JACE

Jace didn't remember standing.

One second, he was rooted in his chair, watching Lyra cast a spell with her voice that cracked something open inside him. The next, he was rising to his feet, coat slung over one arm, feet already moving toward the café's door like the wolf in him had made the decision before his mind could catch up.

The applause still echoed behind him, her laugh twining with the sound like smoke over embers.

He waited by the cobbled walkway, the night crisp and soaked in starlight. The magic in the air still pulsed from her performance, humming low and lazy against his skin.

The door jingled open behind him.

“Hey.”

He turned.

Lyra stepped out, cheeks pink, curls bouncing with every movement. Her eyes sparkled, still warm from the stage, though there was a flicker of surprise when she saw him waiting.

“You leaving already?” she asked.

“Thought I’d walk you home,” he said suddenly, not even realizing what words chose to come out.

She blinked. “Oh. You didn’t have to?—”

“I wanted to,” he said, too quickly. Then, quieter, “You lit the whole room up tonight.”

Her smile wobbled a little. “That song was for me. I needed to get something out.”

“You did,” he murmured. “Got me, too.”

Her eyes widened slightly, but before either of them could stumble deeper into whatever this was, Calla emerged behind them, arms full of wrapped bundles and bottles she clearly hadn’t brought inside.

“I’m gonna hang back a while,” Calla said, raising a brow but keeping her tone innocent. “The café needs a few herbs restocked, and Petra asked for a late-night dreamroot tincture. Y’all go ahead.”

Jace gave a slow nod, and Lyra turned, mock-glared at her cousin. “You planned this.”

Calla grinned. “I plan everything.”

Lyra sighed, rolling her eyes, and stepped off the stoop. Jace followed, falling into step beside her as they left the glow of the café behind and headed down the quiet street.

Celestial Pines at night was a different kind of magic.

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Shadows stretched long and soft. The old gas lamps flickered with charm-light. A gentle hush blanketed the town, like the trees themselves were listening in. The air was cool, but the space between him and Lyra was warm—electrified with the current he was refusing to acknowledge.

“You looked uncomfortable,” she said suddenly.

He blinked down at her. “When?”

“Earlier. When you walked into the café.”

He exhaled through his nose. “I’m not a karaoke kind of guy.”

“I noticed,” she teased gently. “But you still came.”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

He hesitated, eyes on the path ahead.

“I owed you,” he said at last. “After what I said. How I acted. I wanted to— I want to apologize.”

She was quiet for a beat. “You didn’t owe me. But I’m glad you came anyway.”

He glanced at her and the ache that had been pressing behind his ribs all day shifted.

She was radiant. Not because of the spell she'd sung, not because of the attention she'd drawn, but because she was just...her. Chaos and warmth. Wit and vulnerability. A whirlwind wrapped in soft skin and sharp instincts.

"You were right," he said softly.

Lyra blinked. "About what?"

"I've been pushing you away." His jaw flexed. "I didn't know how to let you close without everything else slipping."

She slowed slightly, eyes searching his.

"And now?" she asked.

Now?

Now he wanted to kiss her until the world stopped spinning. Wanted to pull her into his arms and feel her melt into him like magic always had a home there.

But he didn't say that.

Instead, he said, "I don't want you to stop being you."

Lyra stopped walking altogether, standing just beneath a flickering lamplight, the gold catching in her hair like fireflies.

"That's the nicest thing you've ever said to me," she said, half-laughing.

"Probably."

They stood in silence for a moment, the air thick with everything unsaid.

Then Lyra tilted her head. “You really don’t sing, huh?”

Jace smirked. “Only in wolf form. And only when it’s full moon and I’m alone in the woods.”

“Tragic,” she said. “You’re missing out.”

“Maybe next time, you’ll drag me up there.”

“Only if you promise not to bite.”

He stepped closer. “No promises.”

Her breath caught.

Not his.

Because he was still an alpha.

Still in control.

Mostly.

Her magic pulsed in the space between them, tugging at him, soft and wild. He could almost see the threads weaving between them—bondlines faint but present, waiting. Wanting.

He didn’t touch her.

But he was close enough to feel her exhale.

“Jace,” she whispered.

“I know,” he said.

Another step and they were almost chest to chest, eyes locked, the silence around

them folding in like a cocoon.

He didn't kiss her.

But stars, he wanted to.

"We're here," she said, voice too soft.

He blinked.

They were at the stairs to her loft. The green-painted apothecary beneath her window still had moonflowers climbing up the side. She rested one hand on the rail, the other wrapped around the banister like she needed the anchor.

He followed her up the first two steps, slowly. One hand on the railing. The other... aching.

She turned on the landing, breath visible in the crisp air.

He hovered there, staring at her lips.

"I should say goodnight," he said hoarsely.

"You should," she whispered.

He didn't. Not yet.

Instead, he leaned in, close enough to brush her temple with his breath.

She didn't move. But her eyes burned.

And it was too much for him to bear anymore.

15

LYRA

He didn't say goodnight.

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Didn't step back.

Didn't leave.

Instead, Jace leaned in and kissed her like a dam breaking.

Lyra barely had time to register the feel of his mouth on hers—firm, desperate, hungry—before her hands fisted in his shirt and all thought dissolved in a haze of fire and magic.

She gasped against him, and he deepened the kiss, one hand cupping the back of her head, the other gripping her waist like he'd been waiting years for this exact moment.

And maybe he had.

Because whatever this was, it wasn't soft. It wasn't careful. It was wild.

Their lips crashed, teeth grazing, breath stolen. Her magic pulsed between them, sparking in little flashes against his chest where her fingers pressed, dancing like embers through her hair.

She didn't think. Didn't question. Just felt.

Hot. Needed. Real.

“Jace—” she whispered against his mouth, but he swallowed the sound with another kiss, slower this time. Reverent.

Then, just as quickly, he pulled back.

His chest heaved. Eyes storm-dark. “I shouldn’t have?—”

But Lyra didn’t let him finish.

She surged forward, kissed him again, pulled him down to her by the collar of his shirt.

“You should have,” she said, voice breathy, flushed. “You absolutely should.”

They tumbled through her door, barely making it inside.

The second the door closed behind them, he had her against it, hands framing her face, thumbs stroking her jaw, mouth trailing fire down her neck.

She moaned when he bit gently at her collarbone.

Her sweater hit the floor. His shirt followed.

She marveled at the feel of him, solid and real, built like someone carved out of every growl he never said out loud.

He kissed her like a man losing control.

She answered like a woman who’d been waiting to finally do the same.

Clothes came off in rushed movements, fumbled buttons and breathless laughter, curses muttered when something snagged.

But when he laid her back on the bed, the world stopped.

Jace's fingers skimmed her ribs like he was memorizing the shape of her. His lips followed—a slow, deliberate path down her sternum, each kiss a brand. Lyra's breath hitched as his teeth grazed the curve of her hip. This isn't the man who growled at me over territorial disputes last week, she thought, her nails digging into the muscles of his shoulders. The same shoulders that had been rigid with tension when he'd accused her of "hexing the perimeter stones into singing show tunes." Now they trembled under her touch.

"You're thinking too loud," he muttered against her stomach, the vibration rippling through her.

"Says the wolf who howled at me for existing near the eastern ridge." Her retort dissolved into a gasp as his mouth found the sensitive dip below her navel.

He lifted his head, storm-grey eyes glinting. "You were existing...exceptionally loudly."

She laughed, a breathless, tangled sound and pulled him up to crush his mouth to hers. The taste of him flooded her senses: pine resin and midnight air, the faintest hint of bourbon from the flask she'd seen him nursing earlier. His hands slid under her back, pressing her into the mattress as if he could fuse their shadows together.

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As Jace's storm-grey gaze locked onto hers, Lyra felt the raw intensity of his desire. It was a stark contrast to the stoic alpha who had once scowled at her magical mishaps, and her heart raced in anticipation. With a swift, almost feral movement, he moved over her, the muscles in his shoulders flexing. The air between them was electric, charged with the promise of what was to come.

When he entered her, it was anything but gentle. It was a primal claiming, a fierce melding of bodies that sent a shockwave of sensation coursing through her. Her back arched off the sheets, her auburn curls splayed across the pillow as her magic, ever attuned to her emotions, surged forth in response to the overwhelming connection. Prismatic bursts of light danced across the room, reflecting off the enchanted rings that adorned her fingers. The lamp on the nightstand, a mundane object caught in the whirlwind of their passion, reacted to the magical chaos by sprouting a cluster of daisies from its base. The flowers glowed with an ethereal light, casting a soft illumination over the scene, a testament to the power they unleashed together.

Jace's every thrust was a testament to his need for her—unrelenting, consuming, and utterly without restraint. The scent of pine and campfire that always clung to him filled the room, mingling with the sweet fragrance of the daisies and the undeniable musk of their lovemaking. Lyra's breath came in short, sharp gasps, each one a silent plea for more. Her nails dug in as she held on, lost in the tempest of their union.

The bond between them crackled and sparked, a living thing that wove their fates together with every shared heartbeat. In that moment, there was no pack alpha, no chaos witch, just Jace and Lyra, joined in a connection that transcended the boundaries of their respective natures.

As they moved together, the room became a canvas for Lyra's chaotic magic, painting the walls with swirls of color and light. The air shimmered with the remnants of their passion, a tangible reminder of the barriers they had broken.

“Lyra—” His voice frayed as she clenched around him, her legs locking at the small of his back.

“Don’t you dare stop.” She raked her fingers through his hair, silver sparks trailing from her rings. A bookshelf across the room began levitating.

He groaned, hips snapping forward. “Your...damn chaos...”

“Our chaos,” she corrected, biting his earlobe.

The bond between them crackled—wolf and witch, order and entropy—as their rhythms spiraled. She hadn’t expected this rawness, this absence of walls. Not from the alpha who’d once snarled that her “enchanted dandelions” were undermining pack security. Yet here he was, unraveling her with every thrust, his control splintering like old ice.

And to feed the need they both had been denying had to be fed more than once that night.

Later, much later, Lyra lay tangled in the sheets, chest rising and falling, skin flushed and glowing.

Jace lay beside her, one arm slung across his eyes, jaw tight.

She turned toward him, still breathless. “Hey.”

He didn’t move.

Her smile faded. “Jace?”

Still nothing.

The warmth of their moment twisted into a knot in her stomach.

He sat up. He scrubbed a hand over his face, tension rolling off him in waves.

“Don’t,” she said softly.

“I need to go,” he muttered, already reaching for his clothes.

Lyra sat up, sheet clutched to her chest. “Go? Now? After?—?”

“This shouldn’t have happened,” he said, voice rough.

Anger flared through her, but hurt came first. “Wow. Okay. That’s... good to know.”

He looked at her, and there was guilt in his eyes.

And something else.

Fear.

She swallowed hard. “Was this just some alpha thing? You needed to scratch an itch so you claimed the nearest witch who’d let you?”

“Don’t,” he rasped, eyes flashing.

“Then what was it?” she asked, voice trembling. “Because it felt like more. Like something that’s been building since the day we met.”

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He stared at her. Silent. Haunted.

“I’m sorry,” he said before he just... left.

The door clicked shut behind him.

Lyra sat there, alone, still tasting him on her lips.

Still aching, wondering what in the hell just happened. But then again how could she had expected anything different?

16

LYRA

Lyra had never regretted kissing someone, until now.

Not because the kiss had been bad. Far from it.

No, Jace had kissed like he was starved and she was salvation. He’d touched her like he wanted to etch her into his memory. And when they came together, it had felt like the universe had finally clicked into place.

Then he left.

Just like that.

No whispered promise. No explanation.

Just an apology tossed over his shoulder like she was some mistake he needed to walk off.

Now, twenty-four hours later, Lyra sat cross-legged on her cousin Calla's workbench, picking at the frayed edges of her sweater sleeve while her heart tried to stitch itself back together.

Calla had tried. Stars, she'd tried. Comfort muffins, distraction spells, an entire bottle of mood wine. Nothing worked.

Lyra had smiled. Lied. Said she just needed space.

But the truth?

She felt stupid.

Stupid for giving in.

Stupid for letting her heart get tangled in someone who couldn't even say her name without flinching.

"Don't," Milo warned from his perch near the window, tail flicking.

"I didn't say anything," she muttered.

"You don't have to. Your guilt's louder than Petra's garden gnome when it's underfed."

She scowled. "That gnome threatened me with a rake."

“You’re spiraling.”

“I’m processing.”

“You’re brooding in an herbalist shop and pretending those tears are just leftover pollen.”

She sniffed. Okay, maybe he had a point.

“I just—” she sighed, curling in on herself. “I don’t get him, Milo. He wanted me. I know he did. But then it’s like he looked at me after and remembered I’m the last thing he should want.”

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Milo tilted his head. “You ever think maybe it’s not about you?”

She arched a brow. “You defending him now?”

“No. I’m saying maybe it’s about the mate bond. About what it means. About how big it feels when you don’t think you deserve it.”

Lyra’s chest tightened. “That would be easier to believe if he hadn’t bolted like the sheets were on fire.”

“He’s a fool.”

She smiled faintly. “Yeah. But he’s my fool. Or... I thought he might be. Plus, who knows if it even is the mate bond. You and Calla could be full of it. He may just want me, but not enough to really want me.”

The doorbell above the shop jingled, and Milo perked up, his ears flattening.

She looked up as the door creaked open and Ezra stepped inside.

He didn’t belong in sunlight. Lyra knew that instinctively. Too smooth. Too composed. His smile was sharp and his charm came wrapped in silk—but silk could smother.

Still, she didn’t move.

He paused, hands tucked casually in his coat pockets, and offered her a slow,

practiced smile.

“Didn’t mean to intrude,” he said. “Just checking on the stock my pack was supposed to drop off for Calla.”

“She’s upstairs,” Lyra said evenly.

Ezra glanced at Milo, then back to her. “Mind if I wait?”

She hesitated. Milo made a disgruntled noise deep in his throat.

“It’s a free shop,” she said finally.

Ezra stepped inside, the door closing softly behind him. “One of my members saw you at karaoke,” he said conversationally. “They said you lit up the room.”

Her stomach clenched. “Thanks.”

“You’ve got presence,” he said, inching closer, still respectful—almost. “Not just magic. Something more... magnetic.”

She snorted. “Is this your new tactic? Compliments and flowers?”

He smiled, unfazed. “Only when they’re true.”

She looked away.

“I’m not Jace,” he said after a pause. “I don’t pretend I don’t want what’s in front of me.”

Lyra’s breath caught hating at how accurate he seemed to be reading her.

Ezra took one more step, close now—but not touching. “You deserve to be wanted, Lyra. Openly. Without shame.”

And gods help her, part of her wanted to believe it.

Wanted something simple. Something that didn’t come with mixed signals and pain in its wake.

But this?

Ezra?

He didn’t feel right.

Not like Jace had.

Still, she didn't move when he reached out and gently tucked a stray curl behind her ear.

Didn't speak when he let his hand linger a moment too long.

Then Calla's voice rang from the stairwell, sharp and welcome.

"Ezra. Didn't hear the door."

He turned smoothly, stepping back with a smile. "Just checking on that elixir blend. No rush."

Calla glanced at Lyra, who gave her a tight, unreadable look.

"Got it packed," Calla said, eyes flicking between them. "You can grab it on your way out."

Ezra nodded, gave Lyra one last lingering glance, then turned to leave with a tip of his head.

When the door clicked shut, Calla was already crossing the room.

"You okay?"

Lyra stared at the space Ezra had just vacated. "I think I'm madder at myself than I

am at him.”

“Why?”

“Because for a second, I almost let it happen. I almost let him make me feel better.”

Calla wrapped an arm around her. “You’ve been hurting. And you’re human. Mostly.”

Lyra laughed once, hollow. “I feel like I’ve got a ‘Free Emotional Damage’ sign taped to my back.”

“No,” Calla said firmly. “You’ve got a heart. A big one. And it’s not your fault Jace hasn’t figured out what to do with it yet.”

Lyra leaned into her, closing her eyes.

And told herself she hadn’t just let another wolf in.

Because she hadn’t.

Not really.

But she wasn’t sure how many more times she could let herself be burned.

17

JACE

Jace didn’t flinch when Calla Monroe slammed his office door open so hard the stained-glass wardstone above it buzzed in protest.

He didn't look up, either.

He just kept scanning the patrol notes in front of him, even though the words might as well have been scribbles in some dead tongue because the only thing echoing in his mind was the feel of Lyra's skin, soft and warm under his hands.

And the memory of her face when he walked out.

Calla's sandals thudded across the stone floor, her energy storming into the room like a summer squall with no interest in waiting for an invitation.

"You," she said, voice flat.

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He finally glanced up. “Afternoon.”

“Don’t start with me,” she snapped. “I’m not here for pleasantries, Alpha.”

The word was loaded. Mocking.

Jace set his pen down and folded his hands on the desk. “Then by all means, say what you came to say.”

Calla stared at him for a beat, eyes sharp, braid swinging over one shoulder like a banner of war. “Lyra cried. You made her cry.”

Jace swallowed, but didn’t speak.

She snorted. “Nothing? No denial? No pathetic excuse?”

“I didn’t mean to hurt her.”

Calla leaned in, hands braced on the desk. “But you did.”

“I know.”

“That’s not enough.”

He met her gaze. “It’s all I’ve got right now.”

Calla’s jaw tightened. “You don’t get to run hot and cold and leave someone

you clearly care about twisted up in knots because you're afraid of feelings."

He bristled. "This isn't about?—"

"Don't," she snapped. "Don't lie to me. You think you're protecting her? From what? Yourself? The bond? Fate?"

Jace didn't answer.

"You've had every chance to step up," Calla continued, voice rising. "But every time she reaches for you, you shove her back. And I don't care how noble you think your reasons are—pain is still pain."

Jace stood then, slow and measured. "I'm not asking for forgiveness."

"Good," she shot back. "Because I'm not offering it."

The air crackled between them, thick with unsaid things. Old grief. New rage.

And then Calla's voice shifted, still sharp, but cool now. Calculated.

"You should know," she said, turning toward the door. "Ezra stopped by the shop yesterday."

Jace froze.

Calla glanced back. "Complimented her voice. Told her she deserved to be wanted without apology."

Jace's jaw flexed.

“He was polite,” Calla added lightly. “Charming, even. Stayed a little longer than necessary.”

“Hewhat?”

Calla opened the door slowly. “She didn’t go with him. But she didn’t stop him from getting close, either.”

Jace’s wolf surged under his skin, snarling.

Calla looked over her shoulder, eyebrow arched. “If you won’t claim what’s yours, Jace... don’t be surprised when someone else does.”

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The door clicked shut behind her.

And Jace stood there, fists clenched, pulse roaring in his ears.

Ezra.

Of course.

The bastard was always circling. Always waiting for a crack to slide through.

And Jace had handed him one on a silver damn platter.

He turned and slammed his hand against the wall—just once—but it echoed like a cannon through the stone.

His breathing came hard and fast.

He'd known it the moment he left Lyra's bed—that she would think the worst of him. That she would ache. But he'd told himself it was safer. Smarter. Necessary.

Now?

Now Ezra knew where to dig.

And Lyra, his mate, whether she knew it or not—was right in the line of fire.

He dropped into his chair like it had betrayed him.

What was it about that family?

Calla with her righteous fury and sharp tongue. Lyra with her soft strength and devastating vulnerability.

They didn't back down. Not from pain. Not from alphas.

And it shook something in him. Something he wasn't sure he could put back.

He didn't know what scared him more: that Ezra might win her...

Or that he might deserve to.

18

JACE

If Jace had to watch one more fae bicker over ribbon color, he might let the forest swallow the festival whole.

"Blue promotes harmony," said Thistle, hands on her hips and wings twitching.

"But silver shimmers in moonlight," her sister snapped back, arms crossed. "We want shimmer, not peace. It's a festival."

Jace stood in the center of Willow Grove Park, arms crossed, jaw tight, and patience dwindling like moonlight at dawn. The festival committee had dragged him out under the pretense of approving layout charms, but so far it'd been thirty minutes of magical mood swings and enchanted burlap bunting disputes.

He wasn't built for decoration debates.

Still, the Moonlight Festival was important. A cornerstone of Celestial Pines' history—celebrating the founding of the Moonlit Pact, the harmony between magical races, and the beginning of the season's strongest magical cycle. A time for joy, bonding, and renewal.

Which, of course, meant it was the perfect time for Ezra to start poking holes in their defenses.

Jace's fingers curled slightly.

Ezra had always been theatrical. If he planned to make a move—political or magical—it would be during a public event. Something visible. Disruptive. A demonstration of power.

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And Jace could feel the threads of magic stretching thinner every day.

The wards weren't breaking, but they were fraying. At the corners. At the edges. Like someone was pushing against them. Testing.

“Alpha?”

He turned to see Logan, his beta, approaching with a clipboard and two coffee charms swinging from his other hand. His expression was bland but alert—the way it always was when he had bad news he wasn't sure how to phrase.

Jace took the coffee and raised a brow. “Nothing?”

“Same as yesterday,” Logan said, scanning his notes. “Wards still holding. Ezra's pack hasn't moved. No sign he's even left his estate in the last forty-eight hours. Council enchantments say the same.”

“He's up to something.”

“Probably,” Logan said, sipping his drink. “But unfortunately, he's doing it quietly. And legally. For now.”

Jace scanned the grove. Children darted between booths, vendors tested sparkle spells over tables. The energy of the town pulsed—vibrant, alive, but just beneath it, nervous. Like everyone sensed the tension even if they couldn't name it.

“Has he reached out again?” Jace asked.

Logan tilted his head. “To Lyra?”

Jace’s jaw ticked, but he nodded once.

“Not that we’ve heard. Though Petra said she saw them talking again outside the apothecary. Seemed casual. Friendly.”

The coffee in Jace’s hand cooled faster than it should’ve.

He stared straight ahead, watching the trees.

Logan hesitated. “You want me to pull back the tail?”

“No,” Jace said tightly. “Keep eyes on him. But keep it discreet.”

“Always.”

Jace turned, voice low. “And don’t bring Lyra into it. Not yet. Not unless she’s in actual danger.”

“You sure?”

“No,” Jace muttered. “But I’m not going to drive her away more than I already have.”

Logan clapped him on the shoulder once. “Then you better figure out your next move. Because Ezra’s smart. And Lyra’s not going to sit in silence forever waiting for you to grow a pair.”

“Thanks for that, very subtle wisdom.”

Logan smirked. “Just saying—if you don’t want to lose her, it might be time to stop

pretending you already have. And I'm only saying this as your friend, not your beta."

Later that day, Jace stood alone in the Keep's observation room, gazing out across the valley. The town bustled below, strings of festival lights flickering to life. The wards shimmered faintly—still intact, but... strained.

He could feel it.

And the festival was still a few days off, and that worried him more. It gave Ezra time to plan... to strike. Get things just right.

And above it all, a name he didn't want to speak kept circling his thoughts.

Lyra.

He could still smell her magic on his skin if he let himself breathe deep enough. Still hear her laughter tucked into the folds of his memory like a secret.

He'd broken something.

Maybe it was repairable. Maybe it wasn't.

But if Ezra was really sniffing around with intent—and the town was on the edge of disruption—then he didn't just owe it to the Pact to protect Celestial Pines.

He owed it to her.

Even if she hated him for it.

Jace felt something tug at the wards. Harder than before. A disruption. Something angry pulling at the thread and getting through. Then, through his unwanted bond, the same feeling before.

Lyra was somewhere too close to it.

19

LYRA

The basket dangled from Lyra's elbow, the dried lavender bunches inside bobbing gently with each step. The further she got from the edge of town, the quieter it became—too quiet. Even the wind held its breath.

The festival prep had every shop in Celestial Pines buzzing, and Calla had been juggling orders like a potion-wielding octopus. So when she asked Lyra to retrieve

moon thistle and whisperroot from the herb grove just off the old path by the Whispering Woods, Lyra didn't hesitate.

She needed the air.

She needed the distance.

Mostly, she needed something to do that didn't involve thinking about Jace Montgomery and the mess of feelings still lodged like a spell shard in her chest.

Milo padded silently beside her, his black fur bristling more with each passing yard.

"You're twitchy," Lyra said without looking at him.

"I'm intuitive," Milo replied, voice flat. "There's a difference."

Lyra smirked, brushing a strand of hair out of her face. "It's just the woods."

"It's not just the woods. It's the Whispering Woods, which literally earned that name because spirits murmur warnings through the trees. And you're ignoring them."

"I can't hear anything."

"Exactly," he said. "That's the problem. This place is never silent. And it's never still."

Lyra paused, letting her magic hum lightly through her fingers. The air was... wrong. Heavy. Like the charge before a storm or the pause before something big and bad decided to stretch its claws.

"I don't like it," Milo whispered. "Let's go back. Calla can get her own herbs."

Lyra rolled her eyes. “She’s elbow-deep in a batch of shimmerwine jam and you know it. We’re five minutes from the grove.”

Milo’s tail flicked, annoyed. “This is exactly how horror stories start.”

“And yet,” she said, “here I am, still main character material.”

“I’m going on record now. If something eats you, Itoldyou so.”

She laughed and kept walking.

The path narrowed, shifting from worn cobblestone to moss-covered dirt. Branches hung lower, shadows longer. The whisperroot always bloomed just before the treeline thickened, on the edge where the Veil flickered.

She crouched to snip a cluster of silvery stalks, stuffing them into her pouch. “See? Easy peasy.”

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That's when it hit.

A gust of air—not wind. Not natural.

Magic.

Dark, sharp, slicing through the stillness.

“Lyra—!” Milo yowled.

But she didn't have time to move.

A blast of energy slammed into the earth inches from her boots, sending her flying back into the grass. Her breath left her in a rush. Her vision danced with sparks.

Milo hissed and darted to her side.

From the shadows, the airshifted.

Something watched.

Something surged.

Another pulse but this one hotter, wilder and it crackled toward her. She raised her hands instinctively, her own magic flaring up in defense.

But it didn't land.

Because suddenly, he was there.

Jace.

A wall of heat and muscle and growling fury as he threw himself between her and the blast. The magic hit him dead-on, rippling off his skin in a shield of amber light that shimmered like a promise.

“Stay behind me,” he barked.

Lyra could barely breathe.

He’d wrapped an arm across her shoulders, pulling her tight against him, his chest heaving, his eyes glowing that eerie storm-gray she’d only seen when his wolf peeked through.

“You’re bleeding,” she whispered.

“I’m fine.”

“You’re—!”

“I said I’m fine.”

With a snarl that made the trees shudder, he turned toward the source of the attack.

The darkness pulsed again—once, then twice—and vanished like a thread cut loose from the weave.

Gone.

Jace stood tense for several heartbeats longer, then slowly lowered his arms. His breath came heavy. Controlled.

Only then did he look down at her.

“Are you hurt?”

“I—I’m okay,” she said, voice barely a whisper.

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“You shouldn’t have come this far alone.”

“I wasn’t alone,” she muttered. “I had Milo.”

Milo huffed. “For the record, I voted for turning back.”

Jace crouched beside her, cupping her face gently. His thumb brushed her cheekbone, eyes dark and unreadable.

“You scared the hell out of me,” he said softly.

Lyra blinked. “You... you found me.”

“I felt it. The moment the wards buckled. I knew it was you.”

Their eyes met.

And something shifted.

Something soft. Something real.

“You always show up,” she said.

He pulled back slightly, the heat of his body still wrapped around her like armor. His voice, when he spoke, was clipped. Guarded.

“You shouldn’t be out here,” he said, avoiding her eyes. “Not this close to the woods.

Not right now.”

Lyra blinked, her pulse still roaring in her ears. “That’s it?”

He stood, brushing dirt from his palms, gaze fixed somewhere over her shoulder. “We need to get back. I don’t like what’s prowling out here.”

She rose slowly, fury beginning to thaw the fear in her chest. “You just saved me—again—and now you’re back to grunting out orders like none of it meant anything?”

His jaw tightened, but he said nothing.

She stepped into his space, heart pounding. “You can’t keep doing this. Showing up like some dark knight, before retreating behind your walls.”

“I’m doing my job.”

“No,” she snapped. “You’re hiding. And I am done letting you push me away like I’m the problem.”

His eyes flicked to hers—brief, sharp—but the emotion behind them was caged tight.

She exhaled, chest rising and falling. “Something’s happening here, Jace. Between us. You feel it. I know you do.”

He didn’t answer.

“Then why won’t you just say it?” she asked, voice breaking.

He looked away.

And that silence felt like the cruelest kind of answer.

Lyra swallowed hard, her throat thick.

She stepped back, fists clenched. “Fine. Don’t say it. But don’t expect me to pretend I didn’t notice.”

Then she turned and started down the path without waiting for him.

But Jace didn’t let her out of his sight.

“Lyra... wait.”

20

JACE

“Lyra—wait.”

The word left him before he could stop it, sharp and gruff. Not pleading—he didn’t plead—but there was something in his voice that had her halting mid-step.

She spun, her curls catching the wind, eyes blazing like stormlight.

“You want me to wait?” she snapped. “After everything? You swoop in, save the day, say nothing, and now you want me to wait?”

Jace braced himself, every instinct screaming to stay still. To shut down. To control the moment before it cracked him open.

But he didn’t move.

Didn’t run.

Didn’t retreat behind the careful armor he’d been wearing since his father disappeared into shadow and he’d been left to carry the weight of the whole damn pack on his back.

Because this wasn't a pack issue.

This washer.

"I didn't mean for it to happen like this," he said quietly.

Lyra laughed, a bitter, heartbroken sound. "You mean with magic attacks and half-truths in the woods?"

He stepped closer, just enough that her breath hitched, but not enough to spook her again. "I meant me... us. I didn't want to hurt you."

"But you did," she said, voice shaking. "And you keep doing it. So either tell me the truth, or let me go because I can't deny that I feel something as well, even before the other night. But this... This is toxic."

Jace's jaw clenched.

The silence stretched between them, taut and unforgiving.

"You're my mate."

Her breath caught.

And in that tiny pause, the whole forest seemed to go still.

"Say that again," she whispered.

"You're my mate," he repeated, the words scraping past his lips like they cost him something. "I've known since the first day you walked into the Keep."

She blinked, slowly. “Then why—why all this? Why act like I’m some stranger barging into your territory?”

He exhaled harshly, turning from her, dragging a hand through his hair. “Because I can’t claim you.”

Her face twisted. “Can’t or won’t?”

He spun back toward her, voice rising. “You think this is easy for me? You think I don’t want to mark you—pull you close and never let go?”

“Then why don’t you?” she shouted.

“Because everything I touch, I ruin!” he snapped.

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She flinched.

He stopped. Closed his eyes. Lowered his voice.

“I’m not made for soft things,” he said. “I’m not built to love the way you deserve.”

Lyra’s lips parted, but he barreled on, like a dam had finally cracked behind his ribs.

“My father disappeared the night he should’ve passed the full mantle to me. One minute he was this unshakable force—the alpha every other alpha answered to—and the next he was gone. No explanation. No trail. Just me, twenty-three, holding a pack and a town and the Moonlit Pact in my bare hands.”

His voice roughened, like gravel underfoot. “I didn’t have time to grieve. Didn’t have space to fall apart. I had to become the version of him they needed—even if it broke me.”

He looked at her then. Really looked.

And the truth in his eyes nearly dropped her to her knees.

“I can’t bring you into that,” he said, barely a whisper. “Not when it would make you a target. Not when it would tie you to this...this weight.”

Lyra’s hands trembled, but she held her ground. “You don’t get to decide that for me.”

“I know.”

“Then why—why keep pushing me away?”

“Because if something happened to you because of me,” he said, voice shaking, “I wouldn’t survive it.”

Lyra stepped closer. “So you’d rather break both of us slowly than take the risk?”

He didn’t answer.

She stood there, chest heaving, magic curling around her like smoke and heartbreak.

“You say you can’t claim me,” she said. “But you already have. Every look, every word, every time you’ve saved me—you’ve carved yourself into me.”

He swallowed hard.

“I don’t know what this means now,” she whispered. “But I know this—if you keep standing there holding back, you’re going to lose me. And it won’t be Ezra who takes me. It’ll be me, walking away.”

She turned again.

And this time, he let her go.

Because for all his strength, all his certainty...

He didn’t know how to hold her without breaking her too.

LYRA

Lyra didn't remember the walk back.

One second she was standing in the woods, staring at Jace like he might crack wide open if she looked too long—and the next, she was halfway across town, her feet moving on autopilot, her fingers clenched into fists tight enough to leave crescents on her palms.

The wind had teeth tonight.

Or maybe it was just the ache in her chest, sharp and cold and gnawing at the edges of her resolve.

Milo padded silently beside her, not saying a word. For once, the snark was gone. No sarcasm. No wisecracks. Just quiet pawsteps and the occasional glance that said, I'm here if you need me—even if I don't know how to fix it.

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She appreciated the silence more than she wanted to admit.

Because she was tired.

Tired of being strong. Tired of being patient. Tired of pretending she could keep untangling this knot that kept tightening every time Jace opened his mouth just enough to almost say what she needed to hear before locking it shut again.

Mate.

The word echoed in her head like a curse.

It was supposed to mean destiny. Completion. Some fated pull that wrapped two souls together so tightly they became something more than either of them could be alone.

But what good was fate if it came wrapped in rejection?

She reached her loft, hands shaking slightly as she unlocked the door and stepped inside. The wards hummed low and familiar, a soft flutter of safety wrapping around her. She didn't bother turning on the lights. Just dropped the basket on the table and collapsed onto the couch like her bones had given out.

Milo leapt up beside her, curling near her thigh. Still quiet.

For a long time, she just sat there.

Breathing. Thinking.

Trying not to cry.

Trying, and failing.

One tear slid down her cheek, then another. She swiped them away roughly, hating the heat of them.

“I’m not weak,” she muttered.

“No one said you were,” Milo replied gently.

She sniffed. “He didn’t even fight for me. Not really. He just said, You’re my mate, like it was a problem he had to explain away.”

Milo didn’t respond.

Lyra stared at the ceiling. “What if I don’t want to be someone’s mate? What if I want to be chosen, not fated? What if I don’t want to be handed off by the universe like a prize someone’s too scared to touch?”

Milo moved closer, pressing against her side. “Then you don’t have to be.”

She blinked at him.

He met her gaze with those deep, ancient eyes. “You don’t owe him anything. Not the bond. Not your heart. You get to choose what you do with both.”

Her throat tightened. “But I feel like I already gave him both. Even though I know I haven’t, not really. Some part of me feels like I have.”

Milo sighed, tail flicking. “Then make him earn it back.”

Lyra let her head fall back against the cushions. “You think he’ll try?”

“I think,” Milo said slowly, “he’s terrified. Not of you—but of everything else. And terrified men build walls instead of bridges.”

“Great,” she muttered. “I fell for a contractor.”

Milo snorted. “You fell for a wolf. A stubborn, brooding, honor-bound alpha who probably thinks denying himself is some kind of virtue.”

“It’s not.”

“Nope.”

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“He’s going to lose me.”

“Yep.”

“And he’ll deserve it.”

Milo looked up. “But will you deserve to walk away from the one thing that might actually be yours? I’m not saying you owe him anything, but you owe yourself everything and a life of regret and the unknown is a long, lonely path. Trust me.”

Lyra swallowed.

Because she didn’t know. She didn’t know how to forgive someone for fearing her love. She didn’t know how to keep wanting something that hurt so much.

But she did know this.

If Jace wanted to keep her, he was going to have to stop holding her at arm’s length and start showing up with something real.

Not just protection. Not just instinct. But choice.

Because she was done waiting for him to figure out what she was worth.

The Keep was quiet, too quiet, as he paced the perimeter of the old ward line—boots crunching across frost-stiff grass just past the east slope where the shimmer of the veil had once danced strong and sure.

Now it flickered.

Not broken, not yet, but thinning.

He could feel it in his bones. The tension in the air, the pressure behind his eyes like a storm was coming—not fast, not loud, but steady. Inevitable.

And it wasn't just the wards.

It was him.

Inside, beneath skin and bone, his wolf was pacing, restless and pissed, snarling at every moment that passed without Lyra beside them.

Jace growled under his breath, palms fisting at his sides.

He'd told her. Finally.

Spit the truth between clenched teeth like it might kill him if he didn't.

And it still hadn't been enough.

Because knowing she was his mate didn't stop the weight in his chest. Didn't erase the fear that he'd screw this up the way his father had screwed up everything.

The world still remembered Kieran Montgomery as the greatest Alpha Celestial Pines had ever known. Strong. Brilliant. Strategic.

And then one night, without a fight, without a note—he vanished.

Just gone.

No battle. No farewell.

Just dust and silence and a son left with a legacy carved in stone and shadows.

Jace had only been twenty-three.

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Old enough to be groomed. Young enough to still believe his father would always be there.

He remembered the cold shock of it.

The press of eyes on him in the first council meeting.

He remembered Logan pulling him aside after and whispering, “They’re already looking to you. Don’t give them a reason to doubt.”

And he hadn’t.

Not once.

Not until her.

He paused beside the old spellstone marker, fingers brushing the jagged runes that marked the last boundary his father had reinforced. The stone felt colder now. Like it knew its strength was slipping.

Jace clenched his jaw.

He couldn’t afford distractions. Not with the wards thinning. Not with Ezra circling like a wolf with blood on the wind.

And Lyra, bright, wild, chaos in bloom, she was the worst kind of distraction.

Because she made him want things. Soft things. Hopeful things.

The kind of dreams that didn't come with war or weighted silence or the constant fear of failing everyone who looked to him like he carried the sky on his shoulders.

And stars help him, he wanted her anyway.

His wolf wanted her—no, claimed her. Had from the first moment her scent hit the air and lit up something ancient in his blood.

But he'd fought it. Was still fighting it. Because loving her felt like standing too close to the edge of a cliff in a storm.

One step too far, and it wouldn't be just him who fell.

It would be her.

He sank to the ground beside the ward line, elbows resting on his knees, breath fogging in the crisp air.

"You didn't get to run," he muttered. "So why the hell do I still want to?"

The trees didn't answer. But the wind shifted.

And he thought of Lyra's voice the last time she spoke to him, brittle and furious and heartbroken all at once.

"If you keep standing there holding back, you're going to lose me."

And that... that scared him more than the wards ever could. Because he didn't want to lose her. He never had.

He just didn't know how to keep her without breaking the rest of himself wide open.

A low growl rumbled in his chest. His wolf was done pacing. It was waiting. Waiting for him to stop being a coward. Waiting for him to stop letting ghosts dictate his damn future.

He looked out over the valley, where the glow of the town shimmered faintly under twilight. Festival lanterns bobbed in the wind.

Somewhere out there, she was hurting. And it was his fault.

He stood slowly, brushing his hands off on his jeans.

He couldn't fix what his father broke.

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Couldn't change the way Kieran Montgomery disappeared in the dead of night without a trace, without a goodbye, without so much as a whisper of warning to the pack that worshipped him—or the son who idolized him.

Couldn't erase the shame of being the boy who had to step into the shoes of a man the whole town still spoke of like he'd been a god walking among wolves.

Jace had carried the silence of his father's absence like a brand, a constant reminder that even the strongest could vanish. That legacies could rot from the inside. That trust was a blade that cut deeper than any enemy's claw.

He remembered the whispers, he wasn't ready. Too young. Too raw.

The weight of having to prove them wrong over and over, every damn day.

He wasn't afraid of claiming power. He'd already done that.

What terrified him was becoming just like the man who left it all behind.

Disappointing the people who looked to him to lead. Abandoning a mate the way his mother had been left. Loving someone so completely... then breaking them because he couldn't stay.

That was the cycle he feared.

And maybe he could stop it. But only if he was brave enough to be more than what his father had been.

And the first step?

Stop letting fear do the talking.

23

LYRA

The envelope was sleek.

Creamy parchment, sealed with silver wax, the Wolfe family crest stamped into the center like something from a too-formal fairy tale. Lyra found it wedged beneath her front door just after sunrise, still dewy from the morning mist, and too bold to be a mistake.

She opened it before she even poured her first cup of tea.

Miss Ravenshade,

I would be honored to escort you to this evening's Moonlight Festival. Allow me to provide a proper welcome to Celestial Pines.

With respect,

Ezra Wolfe

Her first reaction wasn't surprise.

It was spite.

"Unbelievable," she muttered, tossing the card onto her kitchen table like it burned.

Milo, perched on the windowsill and watching the fog burn off the streets below, didn't bother turning around. "He's persistent. I'll give him that."

"He's poking the bear."

"Or the wolf."

Lyra narrowed her eyes. "Don't."

He turned then, ears flicking. "You're not seriously considering it, are you?"

She stared at the card.

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No. Yes.

Maybe.

Her gut twisted.

She wasn't foolish. She didn't trust Ezra—too polished, too calculating. But he hadn't vanished after kissing her. Hadn't made her feel like an afterthought. Hadn't built a wall of secrets and stoicism around every damn word like Jace did.

And wasn't that the problem?

The way her thoughts always circled back to him.

Even now, staring at Ezra's invitation, she could still feel the ghost of Jace's hand on her waist. Still hear the rumble of his voice when he told her she was his mate—then looked at her like that truth was a burden instead of a gift.

“What does he even want from me?” she asked the kitchen air. “He's the one who brought up the bond, then told me he couldn't do anything about it. Why tell me at all?”

“Because he's an idiot,” Milo replied.

She picked up the invitation again and made a decision.

Later that afternoon, Lyra stood in front of her closet, hands on her hips, glaring at

the heap of options that looked either too boring, too witchy, or too desperate to be noticed by a certain alpha who'd already said no.

She hated this.

Hated that she cared what Jace thought. Hated that her heart still skipped a beat when she pictured his eyes—the color of winter storms and all the trouble that came with them. Hated that her skin tingled every time she remembered the way he'd touched her, like he couldn't decide whether to worship her or push her away.

And gods, he was beautiful.

In that raw, dangerous way she never should've been drawn to. All coiled power and quiet command, with a voice like thunder wrapped in velvet and hands built to protect or destroy. He smelled like pine and earth and something she wanted to bottle and hide in her pillowcase.

It wasn't fair.

He didn't laugh easy. Didn't flirt. Didn't open up.

But she saw him.

Saw the weight he carried. The guilt etched into his spine. The hurt he wouldn't name. And for all her anger, part of her wanted to reach through the silence and pull him out.

But he didn't want to be pulled.

She slipped into a slate blue dress that flared at the waist, cut just enough to whisper against her curves but not beg for attention. Her magic hummed under her skin,

threaded into the charm woven along the neckline—protection, poise, and a pinch of confidence.

Milo sat on her bed, unimpressed. “This is a bad idea.”

“I didn’t ask.”

“You don’t have to. You’re radiating ‘emotional trainwreck with a sparkle gloss finish.’”

“I’m not going with Ezra because I like him,” she snapped, applying a subtle gloss in the mirror. “I’m going because I’m tired of letting someone else’s indecision dictate my worth. I want to enjoy myself and maybe I’ll trick myself into having a good time.”

Milo tilted his head. “So you’re punishing yourself to prove a point?”

She stopped, lip brush halfway to her mouth.

Damn him.

Still, she finished getting ready.

And when she left the loft with her head high and her heart hammering, she told herself it didn’t matter if Jace saw. She told herself she didn’t care.

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But a small, traitorous part of her hoped he did.

24

JACE

Jace wasn't in the mood for a festival.

But appearances were half the battle when you were alpha, and the Moonlight Festival was tradition—light, music, renewal. A time when the whole town came together beneath lanterns and stars and forgot, for a few hours, the weight of ancient pacts and looming threats.

He wore the dark tailored shirt one of the den mothers had insisted he buy last season—charcoal with silver-threaded cuffs that shimmered faintly beneath the enchanted lamps strung through Willow Grove Park. His boots were polished, his hair tamed, and he even managed to fake a smile or two when elders greeted him at the gate.

But his wolf was already pacing.

And the minute he stepped through the veil of glittering lights and caught sight of her, all bets were off.

Lyra. Dancing.

With Ezra.

Her slate blue dress hugged her like a secret, catching candlelight as she spun, and her curls bounced with every laugh. Ezra had one hand resting just a little too low on her back, and his smile—smug, snake-slick—twitched at the edges like he knew exactly what he was doing.

Jace's breath went shallow. His wolf snarled, low and guttural, vibrating beneath his skin. But he didn't move. Didn't storm across the dance floor. Didn't growl, mine.

Instead, he stood beside the drink table like he didn't want to tear the damn place apart.

Logan appeared at his side like a ghost. "She looks good."

"Don't," Jace muttered.

"I was going to say pissed."

"She's both."

"You gonna do something about it?"

Jace's eyes never left her. "No."

"You sure?"

"No."

Logan smirked, but wisely shut up.

Lyra twirled again, laughter escaping her lips like smoke and sugar.

Jace wanted to devour the sound.

Ezra leaned in close, saying something that made her smile—tight and brittle, not the real one—but enough to send fire coursing through Jace’s veins.

Her eyes found his. Across the crowd. Across the music and the lanterns and the weight of everything unsaid.

She met his gaze.

Held it.

For three heartbeats too long before she looked away.

Jace exhaled, slow and heavy, every muscle in his body on edge.

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His wolf didn't want to fight.

It wanted to guard.

To circle her. Protect her. Drag her out of that dance and into his arms and tell her what he hadn't been brave enough to say the last time they'd spoken.

But she'd made her choice tonight. And he wasn't sure she'd welcome his interference.

Ezra said something else.

She nodded, politely, distantly, but her smile didn't reach her eyes.

Jace caught it. So did his wolf.

Then she stepped back, excused herself, and slipped into the darker edge of the crowd, disappearing behind one of the floral arches near the old wishing well.

Ezra stayed behind looking smug. Too smug.

Jace turned to Logan. "Go listen in on whatever Ezra's talking to his pack about."

Logan raised a brow. "And you?"

Jace's eyes stayed locked on the path Lyra had taken. "I'm checking on something else."

He was already walking before Logan could respond.

The noise of the festival dulled behind him.

The grove quieted as he reached the curve of the old path near the vendors' tents, where the lanterns cast long shadows and the air carried the scent of clove sugar and fresh grass.

He spotted her near the edge of the well, standing with her arms crossed, staring up at the stars like they had answers she could pluck down and hold.

Jace stayed still for a moment.

Just watched her.

Watched the way her magic curled at her fingertips like it needed somewhere to go. Watched the way her chest rose and fell, the stiffness in her spine, the way she shifted like she was bracing for something—even now, even alone.

She wasn't relaxed.

She wasn't at ease.

She wasn't fine.

He cleared his throat as he stepped into the lantern light.

She turned, startled, but didn't look surprised.

Only tired.

Tired, and beautiful, and so deeply angry he could feel it radiating off her like wildfire.

But she didn't run. She didn't lash out. She just waited.

And maybe that was worse. Because Jace had the feeling that whatever happened next...

She was done playing the game.

LYRA

The music had gotten too loud. The lights too bright. The crowd too much.

Lyra had needed air, space, peace, and Ezra's voice in her ear, smooth and practiced, had only made the need sharper. She hadn't realized just how tightly her emotions were coiled until she excused herself, stepped beyond the arch of silver-draped ivy, and let herself breathe under the open sky.

She hadn't meant to walk this far. Hadn't meant to end up by the old wishing well, tucked away at the edge of the park where the festival's magic faded into moonlit stillness.

But she was tired of pretending.

Tired of smiling like it didn't ache to see Jace watching her with those storm-gray eyes that said everything and nothing all at once.

You're my mate.

And still, he'd acted like it was something to be ashamed of.

Like she was.

She closed her eyes and leaned against the cold stone of the well, the night breeze catching her curls and tugging gently like it wanted her to stay grounded.

Behind her, a familiar, low throat-clear.

Her heart stuttered. She turned slowly.

Jace stood just outside the lantern's reach, tall and sharp in his dark clothes, looking like sin and regret wrapped in shadows and the kind of pain you couldn't dress up or explain away.

"Didn't expect you to follow me," she said, voice tight.

He stepped closer. "Didn't plan to."

"But you did."

He nodded once.

Silence stretched between them, brittle and heavy.

She shook her head. "You can't keep doing this, Jace."

"I know."

"Then why are you here?"

"Because I saw you with him," he said, voice rough. "And my wolf nearly clawed through my skin."

She folded her arms. "So you're jealous."

"Yes."

“But not enough to actually do something about it.”

“I am doing something,” he snapped, stepping forward. “I’m telling you the truth. The whole of it this time.”

He rubbed a hand over his jaw, jaw clenched. “I can’t claim you, Lyra. Not because I don’t want to. Stars above, I do. But because claiming you means everything. It ties your soul to mine, your future to mine. It makes you a part of my world in ways you can’t undo.”

“I never asked for an undo button,” she snapped. “You never even gave me a chance to.”

“My mother died two years after my father vanished,” he said, voice low. “She withered. Piece by piece. Waiting for him to come back. Trying to carry a bond that had been abandoned. She smiled for the pack, held the ceremonies, taught the rites—but I watched it kill her from the inside out.”

Lyra’s chest tightened.

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“When she used to braid her hair in the mornings,” he went on, softer now. “She’d tell me the story of how she and my father found each other. How fate made it perfect. But after he disappeared? She stopped telling the stories.”

Lyra swallowed, hard. “I’m sorry.”

“I swore I’d never be that selfish,” he whispered. “Swore I’d never take someone’s heart and leave them hollow.”

She stepped forward, anger swirling with grief. “But that’s what you’re doing now, Jace. You’re punishing me for something that hasn’t even happened.”

He looked up at her, wounded and furious and so very raw. “I’m trying to protect you.”

She shook her head. “No. You’re trying to control a future you can’t predict. And in the process, you’re doing the exact thing you’re afraid of. You’re leaving me without ever really being here.”

She pressed her palms against his chest. “I never knew your father. And I don’t know you that well. But I can tell you that you’re not him. You’ve never abandoned your pack. Never let them down. And yet you’re so scared of love breaking you that you’d rather shove it away than let yourself be whole.”

He stared at her like she’d peeled him open with a whisper.

He grabbed her.

Kissed her like it was the last thing he'd ever get to do.

It wasn't soft. It wasn't patient. It was desperate and consuming and aching with every word he hadn't said, every touch he'd denied them, every second of longing he'd buried under duty and pride.

Her hands slid into his hair.

She kissed him back. Because for one second, he wasn't holding back. He washers.

And then, as before, he pulled away. Just like that.

Stepped back, breath ragged.

"I can't," he said again, brokenly.

Lyra's heart shattered clean through.

"Then don't come back," she said, voice shaking. "Don't kiss me and leave. Don't keep giving me hope only to crush it with your fear."

He looked like he wanted to say something.

She didn't let him. She turned, skirts brushing the grass, and walked away—head high, shoulders tight, the sting in her eyes matching the fury in her chest.

She didn't even glance toward Ezra.

Didn't care.

Let him wonder where she went. Let Jace wonder what came next.

Because tonight she was done with both of them.

26

LYRA

Lyra's heels clapped hard against the stone path, each step charged with the kind of fury that made lamplight flicker in her wake. The music from the Moonlight Festival faded behind her, replaced by the rush of wind and her own heartbeat thundering like a war drum.

She wasn't crying.

She refused.

This wasn't heartbreak.

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This was rage.

Pure, raw, blistering rage wrapped in silk and swallowed down past a throat aching from too many things unsaid.

The moment she hit her street, her fingers reached up, yanking the glittering pin from her curls, letting them fall wild and tangled. The protective charm Calla had sewn into the hem of her gown pulsed once with warmth, then dulled as she crossed the threshold of her loft.

She didn't bother with the lights. Didn't need them.

The moon spilled across the floor, pale and honest. Unlike the alpha she'd just left behind.

Lyra kicked off her heels, tore at the laces of her dress, and muttered under her breath, "If he knocks on my door now, I swear I'll hex his mouth shut."

But part of her didn't believe it.

Part of her...hoped.

Her fingers had just slipped the final clasp free, the gown sliding down her arms, when three slow, measured knocks.

She didn't move. Didn't answer. But she didn't need to.

“Lyra,” came the voice.

Rough. Hoarse.

Him.

She clenched her jaw. “You’ve got some nerve.”

“I know.”

“You kiss me, walk away, and then show up at my door again like I’m just?—”

The door creaked open.

She forgot she hadn’t warded it.

Forgot everything when she saw him standing there.

Jace filled her doorway like a stormcloud—his eyes darker than she’d ever seen, his jaw clenched, hands fisted like he was holding back a hundred reasons to leave and just one to stay.

“You left,” she whispered, chest tight.

“That wasn’t the place.”

She didn’t know who moved first.

Maybe him.

Maybe her.

But the next second, they collided. Mouths meeting in the space between anger and desperation. Fingers pulling, clutching, tearing at layers of tension that had been building for days.

Her dress hit the floor. His shirt followed.

The air crackled with the ozone tang of uncontrolled magic. Lyra's back hit the wall, Jace's mouth hot and punishing against hers. His hands—calloused, possessive—dug into her hips, lifting her as her legs locked around him. Fabric ripped. A button pinged against the floorboards. She didn't care. Couldn't. Not when his teeth grazed her throat, not when the low growl in his chest vibrated through her ribs like a drumbeat.

“Still angry?” he rasped, breath scorching her collarbone.

She bit his shoulder hard enough to taste iron. “Furious.”

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A dark laugh rumbled against her skin. “Good.”

He carried her through the loft without breaking contact—kisses like accusations, hands mapping her spine as if memorizing fault lines. Moonlight caught the silver streaks in her hair, casting fractured light across his face when he laid her down. For a heartbeat, he hovered above her, storm-grey eyes unguarded. Raw. Her fingers twitched toward his jaw.

He caught her wrist, pressed it into the mattress. “Look at me.”

“I am.”

“No.” His thumb brushed her lower lip. “Look.”

Magic flared, golden threads spiraling from her fingertips, indigo sparks leaping from his. The bond between them hummed, a chord struck deep in her bones. She gasped as the connection snapped taut, every nerve alight. His control frayed first. A shudder tore through Jace as he sank into Lyra, slow and deliberate, his forehead dropping to hers. The contact was electric, a searing connection that fused them. His storm-grey eyes, usually so guarded, were wide open, revealing the tempest within.

"Lyra—" Her name escaped his lips, fracturing in his throat, a testament to the tumultuous emotions he could no longer contain.

She arched beneath him, her nails scoring him, threatening to break skin. "More," she demanded, her voice a sultry whisper that wrapped around him like a spell.

He gave it, each thrust a testament to his restraint, precise and relentless, as if he were carving a vow into her flesh. Her magic, a chaotic storm of wild, untamed energy, surged to meet his—a counterpoint of primal certainty that resonated with the ancient power of his wolf.

The room around them blurred, becoming a backdrop to the elemental force of their union. Candles flared to life of their own accord, casting flickering shadows that danced across the walls, while books tumbled from shelves, their pages rustling like the leaves of an enchanted forest. But neither Jace nor Lyra noticed these manifestations of their combined powers. Not when her breath hitched in her throat, not when his hips stuttered with the effort of holding back, not when the world narrowed to the singular, all-consuming point where they fused together in a maelstrom of passion and power.

In that moment, the bond between them hummed with a resonance that transcended the physical realm. It was as if the very fabric of their beings had intertwined, weaving a tapestry of desire and need that neither time nor tide could put asunder. The air was thick with the scent of pine and campfire, mingling with the sweet aroma of Lyra's enchanted rings.

“Jace, I’m?—”

“I know.” His hand slid beneath her, angling deeper. “Let go.”

She shattered. He followed, a ragged groan muffled against her neck as their magic erupted—a supernova of gold and violet light that left scorch marks on the ceiling.

Panting, he collapsed beside her, fingers still tangled in her curls. “Your coven ever teach you to control that?”

She traced the bite mark on his shoulder. “Control’s overrated.”

A snort. “Chaos witch.”

“Control freak alpha.”

Silence stretched, their breathing syncing. Jace’s thumb brushed the pulse point at her wrist—once, twice—before he rolled upright.

Lyra snagged his arm. “Running again?”

He stilled. Turned. The look he gave her could’ve leveled cities. “Not this time. I’m just getting started.”

When Lyra woke the next morning, sunlight painted lazy lines across her sheets, and the space beside her was empty.

She sat up fast, heart already dropping.

“Relax,” Milo said from his perch on the windowsill, licking a paw. “He left early. Not mad. Not sulking. Just... had business.”

She blinked, curls a halo around her face. “He didn’t seem upset?”

“Not even a little.”

Her chest tightened. “He said anything before he left?”

“Something about not waking you. Said you looked peaceful.” Milo paused. “Smelled like peace, too.”

She bit her lip, hope flickering to life.

Maybe he hadn't run this time. Maybe he meant it.

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She slid out of bed, wrapped herself in her robe, and padded toward the closet. “I need to get dressed.”

“Where you going?”

She looked over her shoulder, eyes clearer than they’d been in days.

“To the Keep,” she said. “He’s working, right?”

Milo yawned. “Looks like someone’s finally ready to fight for her happy ending.”

Lyra smiled faintly. “I’m not fighting. I’m just...going to talk.”

But deep down she already felt the pull again. And this time, she was walking toward it and she hoped that he was too.

27

LYRA

Lyra held the basket tighter than necessary as she stepped into the Keep.

Milo had practically shoved her out the door with a smirk and a sarcastic “Don’t let your alpha crash mid-meeting from low blood sugar”, but now, her fingers itched with nerves.

Last night hadn’t been like the first time.

It had been different.

Gentler. Not just heat, but something real. Jace had stayed for hours. Wrapped around her like he meant it.

And even though she'd woken up alone again, Milo had said he wasn't brooding. That he'd just needed to tend to pack business. That maybe things were finally shifting.

So she was here. Muffins and all. Ready to talk.

Ready to try.

She rounded the corner toward his office, the door half-cracked. She paused when she heard voices—Jace and Logan, talking low but not whispering. Probably too focused to realize anyone else was near.

"I'm saying you need to be sure," Logan said. "If you're choosing the bond, choose it."

"I can't choose based on what I want," Jace said, voice hard and tired. "It's duty first. Always."

Lyra froze.

There was a pause, then Jace's voice again—lower, almost broken.

"If I let my desires override my responsibilities, I'll fail them all. I'll become exactly what I swore I wouldn't."

She didn't stay to hear the rest.

The basket hit the floor with a soft thud, the scent of warm cinnamon and crushed hope bleeding into the stone.

She turned. Walked. Fast.

The door creaked behind her, but she didn't care. Didn't stop.

Not when the tears blurred her eyes.

Not when Milo's words from earlier—He didn't seem upset—spun in her head like a cruel joke.

He didn't regret leaving. He regretted her.

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Outside, the wind had picked up, tugging at the hem of her skirt, at the pieces of her unraveling. No matter what she said, what happened between them, Jace apparently would always feel that she was the wrong choice. Her or the pack, that's how he would only see it.

She didn't head toward home.

Didn't think at all.

Just followed the wooded path behind the Keep that wound toward the base of the hills. Where the wildflowers grew in tangled bursts and the whisper root swayed without sound. Where the trees didn't judge and the air didn't lie.

She was halfway to the stream before she realized how far she'd gone.

Too far.

The town was no longer visible through the trees. The breeze had gone still. Too still.

Something shifted, too quiet, too wrong.

She reached for her magic instinctively, but it flared strange. Sluggish. Her pulse spiked.

“Not exactly the reunion you were hoping for, I bet.”

The voice slithered through the trees.

Lyra spun and froze.

Three figures stepped out from the brush, cloaked in black, each wearing a shimmer-cast mask that blurred their features. But their scent—faintly wrong, acrid under layers of glamour—curled in her nose like rot.

Wolfe pack.

Ezra's men.

She lifted her hand, a spell already forming.

The one in front flicked their wrist.

Pain seared through her limbs as golden light wrapped tight around her wrists and ankles, slamming her to her knees.

Her breath whooshed out.

Magical bonds.

No, Ezra's magic. She could feel it, the twisted threads of compulsion, the bite of control laced through the shimmer.

“Get off me!” she snarled, struggling, trying to summon fire, anything.

But her power sputtered.

One of the others stepped behind her, yanking her upright. She twisted, bit, kicked.

It didn't matter. The magic held.

“Ezra sends his regards,” the leader said smoothly. “He’s been ever so patient. But now? He’s done waiting.”

“Tell him—” she gasped, still fighting. “—that he picked the wrong witch to screw with.”

The leader chuckled. “Funny. He said you’d say that.”

They dragged her into the trees, deeper, faster.

And Lyra Ravenshade—chaos witch, storm-hearted, too wild for her own good—vanished beneath the veil of shadow and leaves.

28

JACE

Jace had just stepped out of his office when he saw it.

A basket.

Tucked in the shadow of the hall just outside his door. Still warm. Still fragrant with cinnamon and sugar and something heartbreakingly soft.

He stared at it. No one said a word. But everything screamed.

He knew instantly who it belonged to.

Knew what she must've heard.

Knew what it must've sounded like: duty over desire.

It wasn't what he meant. Gods, it wasn't even close.

He'd been trying to explain that claiming her had to mean more than instinct. That choosing her had to be an honor—not a reaction.

But he'd said it all wrong. And she was gone.

“Logan,” he barked, already turning.

Logan appeared from the adjacent hallway, brows raised. “Yeah?”

“Lyra was here. She heard me. She left.”

Logan’s face shifted. “How long ago?”

“I don’t know,” Jace snapped. “Twenty minutes? An hour? I didn’t smell her over the damn conference incense?—”

He didn’t finish.

He was already moving.

Her loft was empty.

The lock untouched. Ward lines undisturbed.

But the air was stale.

He walked through it like a ghost, eyes snagging on little things he hadn’t let himself notice before—her cloak tossed over the chair, the worn spine of a magical theory book left open on the couch, a teacup half full on the counter.

Home.

Except she wasn’t there. And that made it a battlefield.

He pressed two fingers to the back of the doorframe and let the bond spark. Let it hum.

For the first time, he didn’t shut it out. Didn’t bury it beneath pride or fear or stupid

damned tradition.

Hefelther.

Felt the thread that tethered them pulse—distant, muffled, wrong.

Panic slid in, slow and cold. He left without a word.

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Back at the Keep, he tracked her scent from the hallway—sharp with anger, aching with confusion. It carried through the back exit, where it turned wild and fast. Into the woods. Past the herb trail.

Then it was just gone. Cut clean. Too clean.

His stomach dropped.

“Jace!”

Logan’s voice reached him through the trees.

He turned as his beta broke through the brush, eyes wide.

“I found her trail. There’s blood.”

Jace didn’t breathe. He ran.

They found it just beyond the ancient grove of twisted oaks—barely visible to a human eye, but glaringly obvious to a shifter's heightened senses: signs of a violent scuffle. Branches snapped and strewn across the forest floor. A smear of magic-soaked blood staining the rough granite of an ancient standing stone. And worst of all—the unmistakable scent of Ezra, that traitorous wolf who'd turned rogue, mingling with the wildflower fragrance that was uniquely Lyra's.

A vicious growl rumbled up from the depths of Jace's chest as realization slammed into him. "I'll tear him apart with my bare hands," he snarled, low and deadly, fingers

curling into fists so tightly his claws threatened to pierce his palms.

Logan met his blazing stare, the younger wolf's eyes reflecting a mixture of shock and grim determination. "What are your orders, Alpha? Do we call the full pack?"

"No protocols," Jace snapped, impatience and dread clawing at his insides with razor-sharp talons. "Not this time. No waiting for that useless council's approval. No filing endless reports while she's..." He couldn't bring himself to voice the fear choking him. "We calleveryone. Every able wolf, every ally we can muster. Now."

His beta hesitated only a heartbeat before giving a sharp nod and reaching for the enchanted rune communicator at his belt, the intricate symbols etched into its surface already beginning to blaze with ethereal light.

Jace stood motionless at the center of the grove, his body practically vibrating with a thunderous combination of rage and something far more visceral—a cold, gnawing dread he hadn't felt since that terrible night five years ago when his father vanished.

Fear.

Lyra was his mate, bound to him by magic as ancient as the standing stones surrounding them. And he'd wasted too much precious time pushing her away, keeping her at arm's length out of some misguided sense of noble self-denial.

The moment he'd finally opened himself to the mating bond, it had flared to life like a raging wildfire through his veins, scorching away the icy walls he'd built around his heart. He could feel her essence pulsing in his blood now, could sense the brilliant warmth of her soul calling to his.

And now? Now that brilliant spark was frayed and muted, pulled taut by distance and malicious intent. She was still alive—he could feel the fragile thread of her life force,

thank the ancient gods—but she was in agony, her magic bound and stifled by whatever dark forces had taken her.

Jace closed his eyes, clenching them shut against the torrent of emotions battering him from all sides as he reached inward, straining to sense her through the fraying bond.

"Hold on, Lyra," he murmured, the words torn from somewhere deep and raw within him. "I'm coming for you, love."

And this time, no misplaced pride, no ghosts of the past, no sworn oath or ancient protocol would stop him from tearing apart the world itself to bring her home.

29

LYRA

The first thing she felt was cold.

Not the kind that came from air or stone, but the kind that sank in—quiet, thick, like it was part of her now. Her magic was quiet, dull beneath her skin like a song half-forgotten.

Lyra blinked her eyes open slowly.

A room.

Circular. Carved in gray stone. Soft torchlight flickering over the high-arched ceiling. One window—barred and glowing with enchantments she didn't recognize—and a thick door etched with layered runes that pulsed each time she moved.

She tried to sit up and hissed.

Her wrists were bound, not with rope, but shimmering golden cuffs—magic restraints, slick with Ezra’s brand of charmcraft. Her ankles were tethered too, though loosely. Enough to let her pace. Not enough to run.

And it hit her, all at once.

The forest. The fight. The burn in her muscles.

The trap.

A shadow moved near the door.

She looked up, jaw clenched.

Ezra stepped into the room like he was strolling into a dinner party. Immaculate. Relaxed. Polished as ever in a charcoal coat with silver embroidery at the cuffs, hair slicked back like the chaos around him didn't touch his world.

"Well," he said, voice smooth and infuriating, "you're awake."

"Wish I wasn't," she muttered.

His mouth curled into something that might've passed for a smile if you didn't know it was a lie.

"You'll get comfortable eventually."

Lyra sat up straighter despite the ache behind her eyes, the stone floor cold beneath her. The torchlight caught the silver streaks in her auburn curls as she moved. "I'm not here for long," she said, her voice steadier than she felt.

"Oh?" He folded his hands behind his back, cocking his head with that practiced elegance that made her want to hex him on principle. His silver embroidery glinted as he shifted. "You think the Alpha's coming?"

She didn't answer, but her moss-green eyes narrowed, focusing on the runes pulsing along the doorframe instead of his smug face.

Ezra chuckled, the sound echoing off the circular stone walls. "You don't even know if he can feel you, do you? I mean, he's so busy weighing the 'needs of the pack' against his oh-so-untimely feelings, I wouldn't be surprised if he missed the part where you were kidnapped from his doorstep." His voice dripped with mock sympathy, each word carefully chosen to slice.

"Shut up," she bit out, the golden cuffs warming against her skin as her anger flared.

"Touchy." He traced a finger along one of the wall carvings, leaving a trail of faint light in its wake.

"Your charm act doesn't work on me." Lyra tugged experimentally at her restraints, feeling for any weakness in the magic binding her. There was none—Ezra's charmcraft was frustratingly thorough.

He stepped closer, his polished shoes clicking against the stone floor. "Doesn't it?"

She refused to flinch. Refused to let him see the tremble that wanted to crack through her shoulders. Instead, she stared him down, channeling every ounce of the defiance that had gotten her kicked out of her coven in the first place.

Ezra crouched to eye level, eyes gleaming like a predator who thought his prey was already cornered. The scent of expensive cologne and something darker—something magical and wrong—wafted from him. "You think you're his mate."

"I am," she snapped, feeling the truth of it vibrate in her bones.

He smiled wider, all teeth and no warmth. "But has he claimed you?"

Silence filled the space between them, heavy and accusing.

"Has he marked you? Said the words? Even promised you anything?" Each question landed like a small blade, precisely aimed.

Her heart thudded, slow and painful, echoing in her ears. The chaos magic inside her stirred weakly against the restraints, reaching for something—someone—beyond these walls.

Ezra's gaze softened just enough to be dangerous, a calculated show of false concern. "You're smart, Lyra. You've read the lore. You know what it means when a bond is neglected. It frays. Weakens. It breaks." His voice caressed the last word almost lovingly.

"I don't care." She twisted one of her enchanted rings with her thumb, wishing desperately it still held its power.

"You should." His breath ghosted across her face.

"I said I don't." The silver in her hair seemed to brighten momentarily with her defiance.

He leaned in, close enough that she could see the flecks of amber in his otherwise dark eyes. "Because you think he'll come."

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She met his eyes, steady as the earth beneath her magic. "Because I know he will."

Ezra rose with a slow sigh, straightening his immaculate coat. "He'll be too late."

"You sure about that?" she asked, a hint of her usual mischief flickering back to life in her voice.

The faintest crack showed in his mask—a tightening around the eyes, a momentary stillness.

Lyra leaned forward, the chains at her ankles clinking softly. "You kidnapped an alpha's mate. You think you've got time? He's probably tearing through every ward line in this forest right now." The image of Jace—storm-grey eyes blazing, shoulders tense with fury—gave her strength.

Ezra's jaw twitched, the only tell in his otherwise perfect composure.

"Yeah," she said softly, seizing the advantage. "That hit a nerve."

Ezra turned, pacing once across the circular room, his reflection distorted in the enchanted window. Then stopped at the enchanted door, his fingers hovering over the pulsing runes. "You'll see. Soon enough. That mark you think you feel? It's nothing but instinct. Biology. And it fades. Eventually."

"You're wrong." Her voice was quiet but certain, like the whisper of a spell that couldn't be undone.

He smiled again, but it didn't reach his eyes. "We'll see."

And then he was gone, the heavy door closing behind him with a sound like finality, leaving the room colder than before. The torchlight flickered, casting long shadows across the floor.

Lyra slumped back against the wall, her breath catching in her chest. The enchanted cuffs bit into her wrists as she exhaled.

She was shaking, the tremors she'd been holding back finally breaking free.

Furious. Scared. But not broken. Her silver-streaked curls fell around her face as she closed her eyes, centering herself the way she'd been taught since childhood.

Not yet.

Because she felt Jace now. Clearer than before. A pulse through the bond like a distant heartbeat. A warmth rising beneath the cuffs that bound her, pushing against Ezra's magic with something older and more primal.

A promise.

She clutched it tight, curling her fingers into her palms until her nails left half-moon imprints.

And waited, gathering her strength for what was to come.

30

JACE

Jace didn't knock.

He shoved open the war room doors at Moonfang Keep, the heavy oak slamming against the stone wall like a thunderclap. The entire room fell silent. The beta council, his lieutenants, a few elders—every last one of them froze mid-sentence at the look on their alpha's face.

Fury radiated off him in waves.

“Everyone in this room,” Jace growled, “listen carefully. I’m invoking a full-pack emergency search.”

A stir. Murmurs.

One elder, a hawk-eyed fae with a cane more ornamental than functional—rose to speak. “Alpha Montgomery, we have protocols for?—”

“Protocols,” Jace snapped, eyes flashing silver, “can go to hell.”

Silence.

“I don’t care what strings the council thinks I’m tangled in. Lyra Ravenshade has been taken by Ezra Wolfe’s people, and I’m not waiting on paperwork while she’s out there bound and bleeding.”

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“You can’t be sure it was Ezra?”

“I am sure. I smelled his magic and scent myself.” Jace stalked forward, slamming a map onto the table. “His trail ends at the edge of the southern wards, where the scent disappears into shielding. We don’t have hours to debate. We have minutes—if that.”

Logan stepped up beside him without hesitation, voice steady. “Ezra’s made his move. We don’t know if it’s just Lyra he wants or if this is a play against Moonfang Keep itself. We also know that he has been wanting to destroy the Moonlit Pact to cause chaos and fear to his advantage. Either way, we mobilize. Now.”

Jace’s gaze swept the room. “I will not sit idle while my mate is hunted. I will not ask permission to save her. You want to file complaints with the High Circle later? Be my guest. But if you try to stop me now, I’ll consider it treason.”

No one moved.

Good.

Because he wasn’t bluffing.

Not this time.

He was outside prepping the first search teams when he heard the gravel crunch behind him. His head snapped up—and there was Calla, breathless, wild-eyed, and barefoot in a long shirt and leggings like she’d run straight from bed.

“You know, there are nicer ways to wake a girl up than by shattering the Keep’s ward alarms,” she huffed.

Jace didn’t pause. “You’ve seen Lyra?”

“No. Which is why I came running. She hasn’t been home. And when her bond thread felt weird this morning—off, faint—I panicked.” Her eyes narrowed. “What happened?”

“She was at the Keep. Heard me say something she misunderstood. She ran. Ezra’s men took her.”

Calla’s breath caught, and her expression darkened.

"We're organizing a full sweep," Jace continued, checking his watch with a sharp, impatient movement. His fingers tapped a restless rhythm against his thigh as he surveyed the gathering search teams. "I have Logan on route checking westward lines, but we need more coverage. The longer she's out there with Ezra's men—" He couldn't finish the sentence, his jaw clenching so hard a muscle jumped beneath his skin.

"I can find her."

That got his attention. Jace's head snapped up, storm-grey eyes locking onto Calla with sudden, laser-like focus.

Calla dug into the worn leather satchel slung across her chest, pushing aside various charms and herbs until her fingers closed around what she sought. She pulled out a polished obsidian pendant, its surface catching the early morning light with an almost hungry gleam. "I've got the remnants of her scent from her pillow. And I've got her blood from a hair she enchanted last week by accident—don't ask." She shook her

head, a brief flicker of fondness crossing her face. "One minute she was trying to charm her split ends away, the next minute her entire hairbrush was floating around her apartment like some possessed beauty salon nightmare."

She positioned herself in the center of the clearing, feet planted firmly apart, and crushed the obsidian in her palm with surprising strength. Magic flared between her fingers—bright lavender and soft teal strands intertwining like living things—and then swirled down into the ground, seeping into the moss and stone beneath their feet. The energy pulsed outward in concentric circles, leaving faint luminous traces that faded almost as quickly as they appeared.

The airshifted. The wind changed direction, suddenly blowing from the south instead of the east, carrying with it the scent of damp earth and something older, something primal. Jace's nostrils flared, his senses heightening in response.

Calla's eyes went silver, all color bleeding away until they resembled polished mercury coins. Her pupils dilated, becoming thin vertical slits as she stared unseeing at something only she could detect.

"She's in Echo Woods."

Jace stilled, his entire body going rigid. Every muscle in his broad frame tensed as if preparing for impact.

Echo Woods was deep.

Ancient. And dangerous.

The kind of place where the trees grew so densely they blocked out the sun even at midday, where the ground was perpetually shrouded in mist, and where the boundary between worlds was said to thin to nothing on certain nights. The kind of place even

shifters avoided at night, where compasses failed and GPS signals disappeared into nothing.

"South quadrant," Calla muttered, her voice taking on a hollow, distant quality as her fingers traced invisible patterns in the air. "Old foundation. Stone walls. Hidden by glamour." She blinked rapidly, the silver gradually receding from her eyes. "Ezra's using old magic to mask their presence, but Lyra's chaos signature is... leaking through the cracks. Like sunshine through a broken window."

Jace's growl rumbled deep in his chest.

He turned to Logan, who'd returned just in time to catch the tail end of the spell. "Form two teams. One with me, one flanking. We follow her magic."

Logan nodded, already issuing orders.

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Jace stepped closer to Calla. “You sure this is stable?”

“It’ll hold long enough to get you close,” she said, voice tight. “After that, she’s on her own.”

“No,” Jace said. “She’s not.”

And with that, he shifted—fur and bone snapping into place mid-air—and his massive wolf form tore off into the trees.

His pack behind him.

His mate ahead of him.

And nothing between them but time and a monster wearing Ezra Wolfe’s skin.

31

LYRA

The torches burned lower now, their flicker dimmer than before. Time had passed, though Lyra couldn’t say how much. Her sense of it stretched thin, distorted by enchantments and the steady thrum of restrained magic crawling beneath her skin.

She sat curled in the corner of the stone chamber, every bone aching from holding herself together.

He returned.

Ezra stepped inside like he owned the air in her lungs. The wards didn't buzz when he crossed them. Of course they didn't. This was his prison.

Lyra sat straighter, brushing hair from her face with a slow, deliberate hand. Her cuffs sparked when she moved. They were tighter now. As if the magic inside her had grown louder, angrier.

"Comfortable?" Ezra asked, as though they were sharing tea, not a hostage situation. His voice carried that silken quality that made Lyra's skin crawl, like oil sliding over water.

"I've had worse dates." She forced lightness into her tone, even as the magic cuffs bit into her wrists, sending sharp tingles up her forearms.

His smile faltered for a second, a hairline crack in his perfect composure.

Then he turned, pacing with his usual flair across the ancient stone floor, his footsteps echoing in the chamber. The torchlight caught the angles of his face, casting shadows that made him look more predator than man. "You know, this could've been easier. I offered civility."

"Is that what you call kidnapping now?" Lyra shifted, wincing as her muscles protested. The silver threads in her auburn curls caught the firelight, glinting like tiny warning signals.

Ezra stopped at the far wall, tapping a rune with one long finger. It flared blue before settling again, sending ripples of energy through the room that made her teeth ache. "I didn't want it to come to this. But you left me no choice." His voice carried a practiced regret that never reached his eyes.

"You don't get to say that to someone you shackled," Lyra snapped, the moss-green of her eyes darkening with rage. One of her enchanted rings sparked weakly against the binding cuffs, a small rebellion.

He looked over his shoulder, his gaze crawling over her like something physical. "You're not just anyone, Lyra."

"Damn right I'm not." She straightened her spine despite the pain, refusing to cower in his presence.

"You're powerful. Beautiful. The kind of chaos magic the council has feared for generations—and wasted." He gestured expansively, as if presenting her with some grand truth. "All because of some misguided loyalty to the Moonfang Alpha."

"His name is Jace," she hissed, the name itself a talisman on her tongue, warming her from within.

Ezra turned fully then, his mask slipping, revealing the cold calculation beneath. "And what has Jace given you? Silence? Distance? Regret?" Each word landed like a precise blow, targeting vulnerabilities he had no right to know about.

Lyra's jaw tightened, the muscles working beneath her honey-toned skin. Her fingers curled into fists, nails biting into palms.

"You think he'll come for you," he continued, moving closer with predatory grace. "But you felt it, didn't you? That hesitation? That weight in his voice when he talks about duty. He'll never choose you over the pack. He's trying so hard to not be his father."

"No," she said quietly, but with steel. "He's not." The certainty in her voice was unshakeable, despite the doubts that had plagued her on darker nights.

Ezra studied her, head tilted like she was a curious specimen. "Then why are you here?"

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Her magic flared in her fingertips—wild, hot, sparking against the cuffs like lightning seeking ground. The chaos inside her churned, responding to her emotions, building pressure against her restraints.

Ezra didn't notice. Or maybe he underestimated her. A fatal mistake that many had made before him.

"Because you're a coward," she whispered, the words hanging between them like a challenge.

He stepped closer, drawn by her defiance or perhaps by the magic crackling beneath her skin.

She let him, her eyes never leaving his, gathering her strength like a storm cloud collecting charge.

"You took me because you knew he wouldn't let me go. You wanted to provoke him. Test him. You wanted to make me a weapon—or a wedge." Her voice grew stronger with each word, her certainty building like the pressure before a spell breaks.

He raised an eyebrow, amused by her analysis but not denying it.

She smiled, slow and dangerous, the kind of smile that had once made an entire coven back away. "But I'm not some lost little witch waiting for rescue. I am chaos. And you just pissed me off."

Ezra moved to grab her arm and the cuffs snapped.

Magic erupted from the broken restraints like water from a shattered dam. Not shaped, not clean—but raw, pulsing from her core like a scream made of thunder and moonfire. The force knocked Ezra back against the wall, his body hitting stone with a satisfying thud. The runes on the door cracked, ancient symbols splitting like ice in spring. The torches flared blue, casting the room in an eerie, otherworldly light.

Lyra stood slowly, hands trembling with power that had too long been contained. Her silver-streaked curls danced around her face, responding to currents of magic rather than air.

"You really should've listened when they told you not to mess with Ravenshade blood," she said, voice thick with fury and the intoxicating rush of freedom.

Ezra groaned, dragging himself up, eyes wide with the first genuine fear she'd seen in them. His perfect composure shattered like the cuffs that had bound her.

The air around Lyra shimmered, pulsed, bent inward as reality itself responded to her unleashed power. Tiny motes of golden light swirled around her, manifestations of chaos magic seeking direction.

Her hair lifted from her shoulders as if she stood in a wind that touched nothing else. Her boots cracked stone as she stepped forward, leaving faint, glowing footprints in her wake.

Ezra lifted a hand, perhaps to cast or to plead, but she slapped it down with a flick of her wrist. "I'm done playing quiet."

She stormed toward the door and then stopped. Because something shifted. Something familiar.

The bond flared inside her, pure and sharp and real.

Jace.

She felt him, near, too near to be ignored.

She smiled, slow and wicked.

“You’re screwed now,” she whispered.

Behind her, the door burst open.

One of Ezra’s men stumbled in, panic in his eyes.

“Alpha! We’ve got a breach! Shifters—lots of them. It’s Moonfang.”

Ezra’s face paled.

Lyra laughed.

And chaos kissed the air.

32

JACE

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The scent hit him like a strike to the chest.

Blood. Magic. Her.

Jace tore through the veil of glamour shielding Ezra's compound, paws pounding against the earth, fur bristling, eyes locked on the crumbling stone arch ahead. His wolf led the charge—silent, focused, ruthless.

Logan and the rest of the pack flanked him, moving as one.

But he only smelled her.

Only heard her heartbeat, ragged and pulsing like it was calling him home.

He didn't slow. Didn't think.

He slammed through the warped wooden doors with a snarl, splinters exploding into the air. The ancient compound trembled under the force, runes shattering across the walls as chaos magic pulsed like thunder inside the stone.

And there she was. Right in the heart of it. Standing like a storm.

Blood on her cheek. Wrists raw. Power crackling from her fingertips like wildfire.

She turned to him.

And even through the fire, even through the pain—she smiled.

“About time,” she breathed, her voice wobbly but still hers.

Jace shifted mid-run, claws turning to feet, fur to skin, teeth to words. He crossed the distance in two long strides.

“Lyra—” His voice broke on her name.

But she didn’t fall until he touched her.

The second his arms wrapped around her, the strength drained from her legs. Her body slumped against him, still radiating power that sparked against his skin.

“Hey, hey—no, no—” he murmured, catching her before she hit the ground. “I’ve got you. I’ve got you.”

Her eyes fluttered. “Told him... you’d come.”

“I’ll always come,” he said fiercely, pressing his forehead to hers.

Behind him, the pack flooded the chamber, weapons drawn and growls low. Logan threw a binding sigil toward one of Ezra’s men. Others shouted warnings, cleared rooms, broke wards.

But Ezra, he was gone.

Jace barely registered the shouted report from one of his sentries: “We lost him! He shadow-stepped—slipped through a gate rune on the lower floor!”

Coward.

It didn’t matter. Because Lyra was here. And she was alive.

But barely.

Her breath was shallow. Her magic was bleeding out of her, raw and uncontrolled. Jace wrapped her tighter in his arms, pulling her into his chest as if he could anchor her power with his own body.

Jace pressed his lips to her temple.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured, the words thick with everything he’d left unsaid. “I should’ve told you sooner. Should’ve fought harder for us.”

Her breath hitched, barely there, but she was still conscious, barely holding on.

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“I was scared,” he continued, voice cracking. “Scared of becoming what he was. Of failing you. Of losing you because I couldn’t protect what I claimed.”

She stirred slightly, lashes fluttering. Her voice, when it came, was weak but dry with humor.

“Took you long enough.”

He let out a breath that sounded like a laugh and groan all at once. “No more running. No more hiding. You’re mine, Lyra—and I’m yours. I’m done denying it. It’s not instinct. It’s not a burden. It’s us.”

Her smile tilted, tired and crooked. “‘Bout damn time.”

Then her smile faded, eyes going glassy again. “Don’t... don’t vanish on me this time. I swear, if I wake up and you’re gone...”

“You won’t,” he said quickly, leaning in. “I’m right here. And I’ll be here when you wake. I promise.”

He brushed his hand along her cheek, slow and reverent, then shifted his body to gather her gently into his arms. She was light—too light—and bruised, battered, but still buzzing faintly with magic.

He was naked from the shift, not that he cared.

Jace turned to his pack, voice steady but cold.

“Search the compound. Top to bottom. Secure every artifact, scroll, weapon. Find any of Ezra’s people who didn’t run. And bring them to me.”

Logan nodded, already moving, issuing orders with clipped efficiency.

“I’ll debrief the council myself tomorrow,” Jace said.

He looked down at Lyra, her curls sticking to his chest, her magic still buzzing under her skin like it wasn’t ready to rest just yet.

“But tonight, I’m taking her home.”

And with that, he carried her through the crumbling ruins, through smoke and shadow, into the woods that still whispered with danger—straight toward the only place that would ever matter again.

Wherever she was.

33

LYRA

Lyra woke to the sound of rain tapping against glass.

Soft. Rhythmic. Familiar.

The air smelled like pine and something deeper—warm and wild, like smoke clinging to skin, like home.

She didn’t know where she was at first.

But then she shifted, felt the weight of blankets over her, the press of a firm mattress beneath her hips, the subtle ache in her body from magic overspent—and the scent that wrapped around her like a second soul.

Jace.

She turned her head slowly.

He was sitting in the chair by the bed, elbows on his knees, gaze locked on her like she might vanish again if he blinked. He was dressed in a black T-shirt and jeans, but his eyes... they burned with something raw. Protective. Tender.

“Hey,” he said, voice husky.

“Hey,” she echoed, throat dry.

He stood and crossed the room in two long strides, crouching beside her bed like he was still trying to figure out if she was real.

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“I told you I’d be here when you woke,” he said.

Her lips curved. “I almost believed you.”

“I meant it.” His hand found hers, rough fingers curling around her smaller ones. “And I’m not going anywhere.”

She searched his face, looking for cracks. For the familiar hesitations. But they weren’t there.

He looked tired. Ragged. But present.

All in.

“You okay?” he asked.

She swallowed hard. “I think so. I feel like I got hit by a runaway magical hay bale, but otherwise... yeah.”

“Your power—what you did—Lyra, I’ve never seen anything like it. At least the aftermath of it.”

She smiled faintly. “Guess that’s what happens when you piss off a chaos witch.”

His expression twisted between awe and guilt. “You scared me.”

“You broke my heart,” she whispered, then squeezed his hand. “But you fixed it.”

They sat in silence for a beat, the air between them buzzing—not just with magic, but with everything they hadn’t said. Everything they’d finally felt.

He leaned closer, brushing a strand of hair from her cheek. “I know I’ve messed this up more times than I can count. I was scared. But not anymore.”

She blinked. “You mean that?”

He nodded, slow and sure. “I love you. And that’s what scared me. And it’s not just because of the bond. It’s you. I’ve never meant anything more in my life.”

She stared at him, her heart thudding louder than the rain.

Then she reached for him.

Her hands slid around his shoulders as she pulled him down, and he went willingly, gently, onto the mattress beside her. Their lips met, slow, trembling at first, like they were both afraid to breathe too deep and break the spell.

But then the fear burned off. And what was left was fire.

Lyra shifted, sliding her leg over his hip, straddling him as he cradled her back with both hands. His touch was reverent, his mouth brushing over hers like he couldn’t get enough. She kissed him back with everything she had—soft and sweet and desperate.

“Jace,” she whispered, dragging his shirt up over his head, her hands mapping the ridges of muscle she’d only brushed before.

His hands roamed her sides, fingers tracing the curve of her spine, her waist, until he paused. “Are you sure?”

She kissed his jaw. “I’ve never been more sure of anything.”

Her fingers fumbled with the button of his jeans. Jace’s breath hitched—a fractured sound that dissolved into a growl as he caught her hands, pressing them into the mattress. His storm-grey eyes locked onto hers, pupils blown wide. “Slow,” he murmured, the word gravel and smoke. “We don’t rush this.”

She arched beneath him, her laugh breathless. “You’re the one who shifted into a wolf and sprinted through three wards to drag me out of that hellscape. Slow isn’t your style.”

He nipped her lower lip, the sharp edge of his teeth contrasting with the softness of his mouth. “For you,” he said, peeling her shirt over her head, “I’ll learn.”

Clothes fell like leaves, his jeans, her skirt, the lace of her bra catching on a silver ring before he unhooked it with a reverence that made her shiver. The air between them hummed, her magic swirling in golden motes that danced against his skin. When his palm slid up her ribcage, she gasped, her back bowing off the bed.

“Jace—”

“Tell me.” His lips traced the hollow of her throat, fingers drifting lower, teasing the damp heat between her thighs. “Tell me what you need.”

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Her hips rolled against his hand, a broken sound escaping her. “You. All of you.”

He stilled, his forehead pressing against hers. A tremor ran through him, alpha control fraying. “Lyra...”

She carded her fingers through his hair, tugging gently until his gaze met hers. “No more hiding.”

Lyra's heart thundered in her chest, a wild rhythm that matched the storm raging outside the cabin. A shuddering breath escaped her, the air heavy with the scent of pine and campfire that always clung to Jace. Then his mouth crashed into hers, hot and hungry, as he nudged her legs wider with a knee. His calloused hands gripped her hips, the touch firm yet tender, aligning their bodies with an urgency that was both a demand and a plea.

The first press of him stole her breath, a sensation thick and relentless, stretching her in a way that felt more right than anything she had ever known. She dug her heels into the small of his back, urging him deeper, her body arching to meet his with a desperate need that bordered on pain.

Jace's response was a low growl that resonated through her, a sound that was all wolf and entirely his own. His storm-grey eyes locked onto hers, a silent promise that he would give her everything she asked for and more. With each thrust, the world outside ceased to exist, the chaos that Lyra wielded so carelessly now tamed into a shared rhythm that bound them together.

Her fingers explored the contours of his back, tracing the scars that told tales of

battles fought and won. The muscles beneath her touch bunched and released as he moved within her, his control slipping with every passing moment. The air around them crackled with energy, her magic rising to meet the intensity of their connection, golden motes of light swirling around them in a dance as old as time.

"Jace," she whispered, her voice a mixture of awe and desire.

"I've got you," he murmured against her lips, his voice a rough caress that sent shivers down her spine.

And she believed him, surrendering to the man who had chased her through wards and into his life, the alpha who had learned to run at her pace, to savor the chaos she brought into his world. In the sanctuary of his arms, Lyra found her anchor, her laughter and his growls intertwining as they climbed higher, chasing a pleasure that was theirs and theirs alone.

"Look at me," he gritted out, sweat beading along his temples as he sheathed himself fully.

Her eyes fluttered open. The raw vulnerability in his stare cracked her ribs wide open.

They moved like colliding galaxies—slow, then all at once. Each thrust dragged a moan from her throat, each withdrawal a whimper. His lips mapped her skin, worshiping scars and secrets alike, while her nails scored red lines down his shoulders.

"Mine," he growled, the wolf in his voice vibrating against her pulse point.

"Yours," she gasped, magic sparking in her veins as the coil in her belly tightened.

"Always?—"

His hand slid between them, thumb circling her clit in rough, perfect strokes. She shattered with a cry, her back arching as pleasure ripped through her. He followed moments later, his roar muffled against her neck, hips stuttering as he spilled inside her.

“You’re stuck with me now,” he muttered, though his arms tightened around her.

She smiled into his collarbone. “Took you long enough.”

When they stilled, breath mingling in the quiet after, Jace gathered her close, resting his forehead to hers.

“You’re everything,” he said softly. “And I’m never letting go.”

She tucked her face into his neck, fingers tracing his jaw.

“You better not,” she whispered. “Or I swear I’ll hex your ass.”

He chuckled, low and warm.

And when the rain faded into the hum of a sleepy town, Lyra finally let herself drift.

Safe.

Loved.

Home.

34

LYRA

The morning light broke gently across the windows, streaking golden warmth through Jace's bedroom. Everything felt impossibly still, wrapped in a hush that reminded her of snowfall. The air held the weight of something that had shifted—a quiet, sacred kind of aftermath.

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Lyra blinked against the light and reached for the warmth beside her.

Still there.

She smiled.

Jace lay on his stomach, one arm curled beneath the pillow, the other draped loosely across the sheets where she'd been. His dark hair was tousled, lips slightly parted, breath slow and even. The muscles in his back rose and fell, a map of old scars and fresh scratches from her.

Her fingers skimmed down the curve of his spine.

He didn't stir.

She slipped out of bed quietly, bare feet brushing cool wood as she padded toward the bathroom. Her body ached in the best possible way—sated and stretched, still tingling in places he'd touched.

She reached for a robe hanging on the hook near the vanity, but as her reflection caught in the mirror, she froze.

The markings along her ribs glowed faintly.

Not scars.

Not bruises.

Runes.

Etched in delicate script, curling over her side in a pattern she didn't recognize—but felt like hers. Protective magic pulsed from them, ancient and alive, like they'd always been there but needed something—someone—to awaken them.

“Holy stars,” she whispered.

Her magic flickered at her fingertips instinctively, reaching toward the marks as if trying to communicate.

They warmed under her touch.

Not painful. Not foreign. Just...there.

And powerful.

More than anything she'd ever conjured intentionally.

She stared at herself, heart pounding.

“Lyra?”

She startled.

Jace stood in the doorway, shirtless, sleep still dusting his features. His voice was low, scratchy—concerned.

“You okay?”

She turned toward him slowly. “You tell me.”

He frowned, stepping forward. Then his eyes tracked lower, catching sight of the runes along her skin. His jaw tightened. “Those weren’t there before.”

“I know.”

“You cast them?”

She shook her head. “Not on purpose.”

He stepped closer, gently brushing his knuckles against her waist, where the runes still glowed faintly beneath her skin. “These are protection seals. Oldones. Bound to your life force. And they’re stable.”

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“Stable?” she echoed. “I didn’t even try.”

He met her gaze, voice reverent. “That’s the thing about chaos magic—it doesn’t always wait for permission. Sometimes it just knows.”

She swallowed. “You think... last night, I...?”

“You did this in your sleep, Lyra.”

His thumb brushed a swirl of script along her hipbone. “You protected yourself. And me. I felt them wake up around us when I was in between sleep.”

She breathed in, then out. “So what does that mean?”

“It means you’re stronger than you think.”

She blinked back sudden emotion.

He leaned in, pressing a kiss to her temple, then her cheek, and finally the corner of her mouth. “And it means you’re not just some chaos witch with a little mischief in her blood.”

Her lips quirked, amused despite the swirl of emotions in her chest. “That’s blasphemy. I live for mischief.”

“I know.” He smiled. “But I think you were meant for more than even you realize.”

She looked back at the mirror, touching the glowing marks again. “I don’t want to be a weapon.”

“You’re not,” he said. “You’re a force.”

She turned to face him fully. “And you’re not scared of that anymore?”

“I’m not scared of you,” he said, brushing her hair behind her ear. “I never was. I was scared of failing you. But I’m done letting fear dictate how I love you.”

Her heart clenched.

He said it so easily now, love—like he finally understood that love wasn’t weakness.

It was everything.

She kissed him, slow and soft, curling her fingers into the hem of his shirt.

And for once she felt whole. Not because he was there to fix her.

But because he saw her, all of her—and stayed anyway.

35

JACE

The sun had barely cleared the edge of the pines, but Jace was already dressed and pacing the floor of the Keep’s war room, buttoning the cuffs of his black shirt with slow, deliberate movements.

He wasn’t usually the type to fuss.

But this morning?

His hands needed something to do.

Behind him, Logan leaned against the doorway, arms crossed and grinning like a jackal who'd just discovered fresh meat.

"You're smiling," Logan said.

Jace didn't bother denying it.

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“Like, actually smiling,” his beta went on, eyes dancing. “It’s unnatural. Has the world ended and no one told me?”

“Shut up.”

“Oh, Alpha’s got jokes now.” Logan whistled low. “All it took was getting dragged half-naked through a cursed forest and nearly losing the love of your life to a psychotic rival.”

Jace shot him a look.

Logan held up his hands in surrender. “Hey, I’m not complaining. I’m happy for you. Really. I’m just saying—this version of you? The one who smiles before coffee? It’s suspicious.”

Jace rolled his eyes but didn’t fight the warmth that spread through his chest.

Lyra was safe.

She was asleep in bed, curled like a cat beneath his covers, chaos magic still humming faintly in the corners of the room. She’d left traces of herself everywhere—her scent on him, her laughter echoing in his head, the ghost of her fingers brushing his jaw just before she’d drifted off.

And for the first time in years, he felt something like... peace.

Even if it was only temporary.

Even if war was on the horizon.

“You sure you want to bring her into this council meeting?” Logan asked more quietly now, as if sensing the shift in Jace’s thoughts. “She’s still healing.”

“She’s not coming,” Jace said. “She doesn’t need to be in the room for me to make it clear she’s mine.”

Logan nodded once. “Good. Because they’re going to test you today.”

“Let them.”

The council chamber buzzed with tension the moment Jace stepped inside. The central hearth was lit, but it cast more shadow than warmth. Elders lined the long crescent table, their expressions tight with varying degrees of concern, curiosity, and quiet disapproval.

Jace didn’t blink.

He walked straight to the center circle, planted his feet, and met each of their gazes in turn.

“I appreciate you gathering quickly,” he said, voice calm but clipped. “We’ve had a security breach. Ezra Wolfe has officially declared himself rogue.”

That stirred the pot.

Murmurs, rustling, one of the coven elders—Ashra, tall and pale as snow—spoke first. “You’re certain it was him?”

“I tracked him myself,” Jace replied. “He took Lyra Ravenshade and held her in a

warded stronghold in the Echo Woods. My pack retrieved her. But Ezra escaped.”

“And the girl?” Councilor Brandt’s lip curled slightly. “She’s not a member of your pack.”

“She’s my mate,” Jace said flatly. “And she’s more than proven her strength and loyalty to this town. She belongs here.”

“You haven’t claimed her.”

“Not yet,” he admitted, lifting his chin. “But that’s my choice. Not yours.”

The air shifted just slightly.

“You said he escaped,” another council member pressed. “Do you know where he’s gone?”

“No. But we intercepted a communication rune on one of his men. He’s calling others. Rogues. Exiles. Packs who feel they’ve been left behind by the Moonlit Pact. He’s not just rebelling—he’s trying to rally.”

A heavy silence fell.

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Ashra's gaze sharpened. "Then this isn't about you. This is about us."

Jace nodded. "He's making it personal by targeting me. But this is a broader strike. He wants chaos."

Councilor Brandt frowned. "And your solution?"

"We prepare for war," Jace said simply. "I'm expanding patrols. We're reinforcing the outer wards. And we start building alliances—with the covens, the fey, even the reclusive shadowkin. If Ezra's trying to shatter the Pact, we don't give him the cracks to do it."

More murmuring.

"But you'll need a formal claim," Ashra said carefully. "If you're going to speak for all of us, your mate bond can't be in question."

Jace's mouth pulled into a slow, wolfish smile. "Then it won't be. But it will happen on our terms. Not the council's schedule."

Ashra tilted her head, considering.

Brandt looked like he wanted to argue—but didn't.

"I'll send you updates every morning. Logan will coordinate regional defenses. You have my word—I won't let Ezra rip this town apart."

No one questioned it. No one doubted it. Because when Jace stood in the firelight, shadows at his back, the flame of devotion still flickering in his chest from the woman waiting at home.

He looked and felt every inch the Alpha he was born to be.

36

LYRA

Lyra stood at the top of the Keep's front steps, arms crossed and curls whipped by the wind as she watched the town move like a heartbeat.

It had only been three days since Ezra's escape.

Three days since the council meeting.

And Celestial Pines had shifted.

Not with fear. But with fire.

She could feel it under her skin, same as the hum of her magic and the bond that tied her to Jace like silver thread. Protective sigils pulsed faintly beneath her skin, cast in sleep and still singing with purpose. But the power outside—the unity rising from cobblestone and enchanted storefronts—was something else entirely.

This town wasn't just preparing for war.

It was preparing to win.

"Hey, war witch," Calla's voice called, teasing but tired as she joined Lyra on the

steps with two steaming mugs in hand. “You look like you’re trying to talk to the sky.”

“I’m thinking,” Lyra muttered, accepting a mug gratefully.

“Dangerous pastime.”

“It’s this or hex a fence post again.”

Calla snorted. “Twice was plenty.”

They sipped in silence for a moment. Down below, Mason the local baker was enchanting his delivery cart to levitate through smoke. Tansy from the Spellbound Sip stood beside him, drawing magical runes on rows of travel-safe potion bottles. Even Mrs. Heller from the antique shop had closed early—probably off blessing every doorframe in a two-mile radius.

Calla exhaled. “You know... I always thought if this town ever got tested, we’d fall apart. Turns out, we’ve just been waiting for a good enough reason to stand together.”

Lyra nodded, eyes stinging. “It’s not just us. It’s everyone. The wolves, the witches, the little magical oddballs in between. All pulling in the same direction.”

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“Because of you,” Calla said, tone soft.

Lyra looked at her. “It’s because of Jace.”

Calla smirked. “No. It’s because of you two. Don’t downplay it. They’re rallying around their Alpha and his witch mate. It’s written in the air. This town has never been conventional, but Jace had been. It made the town feel like they had to be too. It gave us limits. Safety, but limits. Then the alpha fell for a chaos witch and finally let himself be taken by her. It shifted everything. No one is now hesitant about how they feel for another or even what they may be capable of. You were a walking mess—”

“Gee, thanks,” Lyra said sarcastically.

“Well, it’s true. You had confidence. But not enough. Then you were challenged and showed your true colors making everyone realize that they are more if they want to me. Feels like fate decided to put a spine in this town.”

“You really think so?”

Calla smiled. “See, there’s the hesitant witch I remember. It’s good she’s still there, it’ll keep you humble when you start running this place.”

Lyra almost choked on her sip as Calla playfully nudged her with her elbow.

“You’ve got this. You always have. But now you believe in yourself and you also stood up for yourself. Given, after a lot of self-beatings, but you did. And it’s contagious. Even to Alpha Montgomery.”

That afternoon, Lyra walked through the square with Jace beside her, their hands brushing but not quite clasped—half shy, half reverent. They stopped to check on fortification spells near the edge of the Whispering Woods where the veil thinned. She helped reinforce them with a new ward that shimmered silver-blue, a chaotic twist of protection that made Logan shake his head and mutter, “Witchcraft never looked prettier.”

That night, they sat at her loft window, shoulders pressed together as stars blinked in slow patterns overhead.

“We’ve got thirty volunteers watching the outer perimeter,” Jace said, his voice low. “Half of them aren’t trained for battle, but they’re offering anyway.”

“They just want to protect home,” she replied.

He looked at her, eyes soft. “You doing okay?”

Lyra considered it, then shrugged. “I should be terrified. But I’m not.”

“Because you trust me?”

“Because I trustus.”

He reached over and brushed her cheek with the back of his hand. “I meant it, Lyra. When I told them you were mine. I didn’t need a bite to prove it.”

She leaned into him. “You never did.”

Day two brought long hours at Moonfang Keep. Jace coordinated shifts. Lyra sat with Calla and Nora from the Spellbound Sip, brewing enchanted salves, while Milo stalked around muttering about weak potion labels and poor script work. Logan

taught the kids of the town how to use protective charms, calling it “combat daycare.”

At one point, Jace walked into the archives to find Lyra sleeping in a chair with spellbooks still open in her lap. He didn’t wake her—just draped his jacket over her shoulders and stood nearby like a silent sentinel.

When she woke later, he was still there, watching her like he’d finally learned that loving someone didn’t mean controlling them—it meant staying.

By the third morning, fog rolled in heavy, clinging low to the cobbled streets. The enchantments woven into the town buzzed with tension, and even the birdsong seemed cautious.

Lyra stood at the Keep gates as a group of town leaders gathered—Pack lieutenants, coven elders, shopkeepers-turned-warriors. A pulse thrummed beneath her feet, subtle but strong.

Jace’s voice cut through the hush as he addressed them all.

“No one is alone in this.”

No one spoke.

He stepped forward, placing a hand on Lyra’s back.

“We stand as one. And no matter what Ezra throws at us—this town doesn’t break. Not while we’ve got breath left in our lungs.”

The air thickened with magic. And Lyra felt it down to her bones.

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Something was coming. But so were they.

Celestial Pines had chosen its side.

And this time, chaos was fighting with them.

37

JACE

The forest didn't whisper that night, it roared.

The ground trembled with the weight of approaching fury, like the earth itself had drawn breath and was holding it, waiting for blood.

Jace stood at the clearing's edge, shoulders squared beneath the weight of war.

His wolves—his people—flanked him, their eyes glowing in the dark, jaws tight, spells laced across their armor and skin. The coven stood behind them, flanked by enchanted sigils glowing along the treeline, a kaleidoscope of protection and defiance. Lyra's chaotic energy pulsed beneath his ribs like a second heartbeat.

He'd never felt more alive.

Or more sure.

"We hold the line here," he said, his voice carrying across the clearing, low and

commanding. “This is our land. Our home. And they don’t get it. Not today.”

Logan cracked his knuckles beside him. “Hell of a night for a reckoning.”

Jace’s eyes narrowed toward the black veil rising beyond the trees.

“It’s time.”

A howl split the air—high, sharp, wrong. It came from the other side of the veil, just before Ezra’s rogues breached the treeline. Half-shifted forms, glowing eyes, tangled furs. Some ran on two legs, others on four. And leading them, with that same smug smile carved onto his too-pretty face, was Ezra.

His pack poured into the clearing like poison.

And Jace, he met them head-on.

With a primal roar, he shifted mid-stride, bones snapping clean as his wolf form surged forward—midnight dark and massive. The first rogue that lunged was met with teeth and fury, his neck broken with a single twist of Jace’s jaw. Around him, the clash broke out in chaos—wolves tearing through wolves, magic flaring from coven witches, townsfolk holding the line with weapons and will.

A cry rose behind them.

Lyra’s voice.

Strong. Commanding. Ethereal.

“By root and ash, by thorn and flame—forest spirits, rise and claim!”

The earth cracked beneath her.

From the Whispering Woods came movement—not just wind, but shapes. Old ones. Spirits in bark and bone, antlers and moss. The forest answered her call, stepping into the clearing with eyes like starlight and breath like stormwind.

The rogues faltered.

Jace didn't.

He broke through the enemy line like a shadow, tearing toward Ezra, who stood grinning on a rise just ahead, sword in one hand, dark magic coiled in the other.

“About time,” Ezra sneered. “You always did like to make an entrance.”

Jace shifted back into his human form mid-leap, landing hard with a sword drawn from the ether. He had put on his enchanted battle garb that reappeared on him when he shifted back instead of being left in tatters and him naked. His scabbard was there too. “You always did like running your mouth.”

They collided.

Steel against steel. Alpha against alpha.

Every blow struck with purpose, every parry a promise. The air around them crackled with tension and raw power as their weapons clashed, sending sparks flying into the night. The ground beneath their feet trembled with each impact, mud and leaves churning under their relentless battle dance.

"You think these people will follow a wolf who lies to his mate?" Ezra taunted, dodging left with the fluid grace of a predator. His eyes gleamed with malicious delight as he added, "Who hesitated when she needed you most?"

Jace's blade missed by inches, slicing through the air where Ezra's throat had been moments before, but his voice didn't waver. The storm in his grey eyes intensified, muscles coiling beneath his battle-worn henley. "And yet I've got the whole damn town behind me. What've you got, Ezra? A pack of traitors who'll scatter like rats when this is done? Men without loyalty are just bodies waiting to fall."

Ezra snarled, his handsome face contorting with rage. He threw a bolt of corrupted magic, the kind he had learned when being a shifter wasn't enough—black and red tendrils that writhed like living shadows—but Jace ducked, rolled across the blood-soaked earth, and came up swinging. His blade sliced clean through Ezra's side with a satisfying resistance. Blood bloomed across his coat, darkening the expensive fabric.

The rogue alpha stumbled, one knee nearly touching the ground.

But only for a breath. His recovery was unnervingly swift, fueled by whatever dark power he'd been channeling.

"I should've taken her when I had the chance," Ezra hissed through clenched teeth, his voice dropping to a venomous whisper as he circled Jace. His fingers twitched with barely contained magic. "She was meant for more than you. All that chaos magic wasted on a wolf who can't even protect what's his."

"You so much as speak her name again—" Jace lunged forward with primal ferocity, blade catching Ezra's collarbone with a crunch of bone and steel "—and I'll rip your tongue out while you're still breathing to feel it."

They broke apart for half a second, panting, sweat glistening on their foreheads despite the cold night air. Around them, the forest burned with spellfire and snarls. The ancient spirit guardians Lyra had summoned tore through Ezra's pack with otherworldly precision, their bark-covered limbs moving with terrifying efficiency. Jace could feel Lyra standing at the edge of it all—glowing with silver-tinged power, auburn curls whipping in the magical winds, her moss-green eyes locked on him with everything she had. The scent of her magic—wild honey and storm clouds—reached him even through the chaos.

That was why he was here. That was who he was fighting for. Not just his pack or his town, but the witch who'd turned his orderly world upside down and made him believe again.

He charged again, sword raised high, heart pounding against his ribs like a war drum.

And didn't see the dagger until it was too late.

LYRA

Lyra felt it before she saw it.

Like the earth itself cracked. Like her heart stopped beating.

The moment Jace fell, something in her split wide open.

She had just cast another binding circle around the edge of the battlefield, directing forest spirits through a burst of spellfire, when it hit her—a hollow pull, a tether violently slackening.

Her head whipped toward the center of the clearing. And there he was. Crumbled on the ground. Blood blooming from his side, soaking into the dirt like a curse.

“JACE!”

She didn’t remember running. Didn’t remember screaming.

Only the wind tearing at her hair, the forest shuddering beneath her boots, the sound of wolves fighting and dying around her like background noise.

Everything tunneled into him.

She dropped beside his body, knees hitting the bloodstained grass, hands already glowing as she pressed them against his chest.

“No, no—don’t you do this. Don’t you leave me.”

His eyes were closed. Too still. Too quiet.

Her magic sparked at her fingertips, shaky and wild, flickering like a candle in a storm.

“Please,” she whispered. “Jace—wake up. I need you.”

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A cough sounded behind her.

Not his.

Ezra.

He stepped into the clearing like a god ascending, robes torn but his smirk intact. The blade in his hand was slick with Jace's blood, still humming with dark enchantment.

Lyra rose slowly, her entire body trembling. She stalked toward him leaving Jace's lifeless body as anger, fear, loss, all consuming her ability to think clearly.

Ezra smiled. "You should've joined me."

Her magic sputtered again, slipping between her fingers like water.

"You should've seen what this could be, Lyra. Power without fear. Order without sacrifice."

"Shut up," she hissed.

"You think this little town's loyalty means anything?" he went on, circling her like a predator. "The Moonlit Pact is a dream. It's a weakness. And it broke him. Just like it'll break the rest of them."

"You killed him," she choked out.

Ezra raised an eyebrow. "I gave him a warrior's death."

Her vision blurred, the world swimming in and out of focus like a mirage on hot pavement. The intricate runes etched beneath her skin—once vibrant with chaos magic—dimmed to a faint, sickly glow. Her heart wasn't just breaking; it was screaming, clawing, tearing itself to shreds inside her chest for him.

Ezra lifted his hand with theatrical grace, dark magic building in his palm—a swirling vortex of midnight and blood that pulsed with malevolent hunger. "This is your last chance, Lyra. Come willingly—and I'll spare what's left of your precious little coven." His voice dropped to a silken purr. "Reject me, and you fall with the rest. Our joining with your chaos and my practice could be extraordinary. Imagine what we could create together, what worlds we could reshape."

Her knees buckled beneath her, hitting the dirt with a dull thud as her magic faltered like a dying flame. The power that had always come so easily, so wildly, now seemed to retreat from her fingertips, leaving her hollow.

She stared down at Jace, bloodied, still, far too still—his broad chest unmoving, those storm-grey eyes hidden behind closed lids. Something inside her started to give, crumbling like ancient stone. The man who'd scowled and growled and protected them all with unwavering loyalty now lay broken, and it was more than she could bear.

The grief pulled at her like a riptide, threatening to drag her under completely, to drown her in its dark, cold depths.

Until a sound split the air.

Low.

Fierce.

Familiar.

A howl, not just any howl, but one that reverberated through the clearing and shook the very ground beneath them.

Ragged and wild, full of agony and rage and something deeper—something primal that spoke of mountains and moonlight and ancient pack bonds that could not be severed, not even by death.

From the edge of the battlefield, near where his body had been left to fade into the earth, a massive black wolf rose from the dirt, shaking off soil and leaves and the very grip of death itself.

Jace.

Alive. Barely. But rising. Blood matted his midnight fur in dark, sticky patches, one leg dragging uselessly behind him, his side torn open to reveal glistening muscle beneath—but his eyes blazed gold, fierce with determination and something that looked suspiciously like love.

Ezra turned, shock rippling through his perfect features, his composure cracking for the first time since this nightmare began.

"What—"

Lyra moved before thought returned, before reason could caution her. The magic that had abandoned her moments ago surged back tenfold, like it had only been gathering strength.

Magic exploded from her chest in a violent surge that felt like it might rip her apart at the seams. It burned blue-white, crackling with silver sparks, streaking toward Ezra like a living storm hungry for vengeance. Her hands lifted automatically, mouth moving faster than reason, ancient words tumbling from her lips as the runes on her skinscreamed with purpose, glowing so brightly they shone through her clothing.

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"You don't get to win," she growled, her voice barely recognizable, thick with power and fury. "Not today. Not ever."

Ezra staggered back as the blast hit him square in the chest, his carefully constructed wards cracking like glass under pressure, his smug smile faltering for the first time since this bloody confrontation began.

Jace didn't lunge toward Ezra as she expected. He limped toward her instead, each step clearly agony, his golden eyes never leaving her face, filled with a devotion that made her heart stutter.

"Lyra..." he murmured in her head—just a whisper across the bond they'd formed without meaning to, fragile but unbreakable.

She turned, breath catching in her throat, hope blooming painfully in her chest.

He was barely holding his wolf form, muscles trembling with the effort, blood dripping steadily from his torn flank, pooling beneath his massive paws, but he was alive. Against all odds, against Ezra's blade, against death itself—Jace had returned to her.

Then, before she could turn back around, before she could finish what she'd started, Ezra's rage had surged to monstrous heights. Lyra barely had time to react.

Ezra burst from the trees like a nightmare given flesh, his blade laced with blood magic and venom, glowing with sickly green light. His handsome face was twisted in triumph and hatred, no longer bothering with the mask of civility. His eyes were

wrong—glassy, black-rimmed, like something hollow and ancient had taken root behind them. Magic cracked in the air like thunder as he charged, every step shattering the protective circle she'd painstakingly carved into the earth hours earlier.

Her voice faltered mid-chant, the spell dissolving on her tongue.

"Jace!" she screamed, but he was too far—too hurt to reach her in time.

Ezra was already on her, his breath hot against her face, smelling of decay and dark promises.

Her hands lifted desperately, power surging through her veins once more, but not fast enough to form a shield, not fast enough to counter his attack.

He grinned, raising the blade overhead, triumph gleaming in those empty eyes.

And then a shadow hit him from the side like a meteor, a blur of black fur and primal fury.

Jace.

39

JACE

Pain.

White-hot. Bone-deep. Unrelenting.

That's what greeted Jace as he stumbled to his feet, blood dripping from his ribs, his breath ragged with each step.

But he moved anyway. Because she was still standing.

Because Lyra, his mate, his storm, his chaos—was in the center of that hellfire battlefield, surrounded by Ezra's magic and the spirits she'd summoned with blood and will.

And no one was touching her without going through him first.

He shifted, the transformation slow, forced, every muscle screaming in protest. His wolf form gave him strength, but it was barely holding together. Blood seeped through fur. The air smelled like ash and death.

Yet all he could see was her.

Lyra stood in a ring of glowing roots and whispering wind, her eyes glowing with arcane light. Her voice lifted in chant, ancient syllables rolling off her tongue like thunder in slow motion. She was calling down the final binding—one meant to sever Ezra's hold on his rogue wolves, on the land he'd corrupted, on the pack he'd tried to dismantle.

But Ezra wasn't done.

He lunged from the shadows, magic flaring around his blade, his form still human—but warped, eyes wild, lips curled into something unhinged.

“No!” Jace snarled and charged, ignoring the searing pain that ripped down his spine.

Ezra turned too late.

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Jace hit him like a train.

They rolled across the battlefield, claws and steel, teeth and fists. Ezra roared and slashed again—catching Jace’s already-wounded side. He howled in pain but didn’t stop.

“You’re done!” Jace growled, pinning him with raw force.

Ezra spat blood, grinning. “I almost took her.”

“You never had a chance.”

Jace’s jaws snapped an inch from his throat.

Ezra surged with one final burst of energy but behind them, Lyra’s voice reached its crescendo.

“By pact and flame, by root and sky—be bound or be undone!”

A blast of light exploded outward, pure and blinding.

Ezra screamed.

The ground split open beneath him, runes flaring gold and violet as the forest spirits surrounded him, whispering judgment with every step. His form twisted, magic torn from his veins. His weapon shattered. And with one last howl of fury and fear— He vanished. Swallowed by earth and spell.

Silence fell. Slow. Final.

Jace slumped to the ground, his wolf form fading as he shifted back. He hit the dirt hard, coughing, the world swimming in and out of focus.

But footsteps came.

Soft. Familiar.

She was there, falling to her knees beside him.

“Jace!”

He blinked up at her, reaching weakly. “Hey, witchling.”

“Don’t you dare pull that charming-alpha nonsense right now,” she choked out, hands already glowing with healing light. “You scared me half to death.”

“Only half?” He coughed a laugh. “Slacking, then.”

Her fingers pressed to his wound, magic sinking into his skin. It hurt, but in a clean way. Amending way.

“You saved me,” she whispered.

He caught her wrist. “No. You saved me this time.”

She laughed, tears slipping down her cheeks.

“I love you,” she said, breath shaking.

She leaned closer, pressing her forehead to his. “I love you, Jace Montgomery. Stubborn, grumpy, pain-in-my-ass Alpha that you are.”

“I love you too,” he said, no hesitation this time. “I think I did from the second you walked into my office with your big eyes and your bigger mouth.”

She laughed again and kissed him, soft and sweet, magic humming between them.

The battle was over. Ezra was gone.

But they had just begun.

40

JACE

The wind in Celestial Pines carried a new kind of weight.

Not sorrow. Not fear. But peace.

Jace stood at the northern overlook just as the last of the twilight dipped behind the mountains, casting the whole town in molten gold. Below him, the townsfolk gathered in the circle where the Moonlit Pact would be renewed. He could hear the soft rise and fall of voices—warm, buzzing with anticipation. The scent of fresh-baked bread and wild herbs drifted up through the trees. Someone was playing a fiddle near the bonfire. Children laughed.

And somewhere near the edge of it all, Lyra was smiling.

He hadn't seen her yet tonight.

By tradition, the leaders of the Pact entered together—after the formal invocation. But he could feel her. In his bones. In the way the air tilted around him like it was leaning in to listen.

He adjusted the collar of his shirt—black, simple, unadorned except for the silver threads Calla had sewn into the cuffs. Protective runes, old ones. He hadn't asked her to. She justknew.

“Trying to fix your hair again?” Logan’s voice rang behind him, dry as ever.

Jace didn’t turn. “If I ask nicely, think you’ll stop talking for five minutes?”

Logan walked up beside him, shoulder to shoulder, gaze focused on the crowd. “Doubtful. But I will say this—tonight feels different.”

“Because it is.”

Logan grunted. “First time in decades the Moonlit Pact’s being renewed by an Alpha and a witch. You ready to be the talk of every enchanted coven and old guard in three provinces?”

Jace finally glanced sideways. “They’ll survive.”

“They better. ‘Cause it’s not just your name on this anymore.” Logan paused. “It’s hers too.”

Jace’s mouth pulled into a rare, slow smile. “Yeah. It is.”

At the base of the hill, bells rang—deep, soft tones, one after the other.

It was time.

Jace descended slowly, the crowd parting with quiet reverence as he walked through. Shifters bowed their heads. Witches nodded in respect. Fey, gnarled and glowing faintly in the dusk, lifted their cups in silent salute.

At the heart of the circle, the ceremonial stones glowed with the old runes—three languages, one meaning: Harmony. Honor. Home.

She stepped into the clearing.

Every head turned.

Jace's heart didn't skip, it paused.

Lyra wore deep green, the color of forest moss and old magic, her curls loose around her shoulders, and her gaze locked only on him. Her smile wasn't wide—it was steady. Fierce. Soft in a way that made him feel seen in every place he never let anyone look.

She crossed to him without hesitation.

He held out his hand.

She took it without question.

Together, they turned to face the altar.

The town's oldest living elder—a shifter-witch hybrid named Mirelle—stepped forward, hands raised.

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“We are gathered,” she intoned, voice strong despite her age, “to renew the Pact forged in shadow and shaped in light. A vow between kin of magic and blood to protect this land, and each other, as one.”

Jace’s fingers squeezed around Lyra’s.

“We do not forget what was lost,” Mirelle continued, eyes scanning the crowd. “But we choose now—here, together—to honor what remains.”

A murmur of agreement moved through the circle.

“And this time, the Pact is not led by division, but by unity. Alpha Jace Montgomery of Moonfang Keep, do you stand to uphold the Pact?”

“I do.”

“And Lyra Ravenshade, of blood and bond, do you stand with him?”

Lyra’s voice rang clear. “I do.”

“Then let this magic be cast.”

Light flared from the altar, weaving gold into the air. Vines curled through the stonework, blooming wildflowers of every color. Magic bound itself not just to land, but to people.

To them.

The crowd erupted.

Cheers, whistles, laughter. The music picked up again, and somewhere in the blur of sound and motion, Lyra leaned into his side and murmured, “Still grumpy?”

He looked down at her, full smile cracking across his face. “Not when you’re around.”

They didn’t leave each other’s side all night.

People approached them. Thanked them. Hugged Lyra like she’d saved the town singlehandedly—and she might’ve. Children gave her garlands of flowers. One of the shadowkin offered her a charm of moonlight wrapped in stone.

Everywhere Jace looked, he saw life again.

And he knew, without question, that the thing he’d feared most—losing control, losing himself in the chaos of love, was the very thing that had saved them all.

41

LYRA

If the battle had been fire and fury, then the days that followed were stitched together with soft laughter, sticky fingers, and a kind of peace Lyra had only ever dreamed about.

Celestial Pines was healing.

Not in some grand, world-shaking kind of way—but in the little things.

The sweet kind.

Like the sound of shifter pups tearing through the garden behind Moonfang Keep, chasing each other with wild grins and muddy paws while Calla yelled at them for trampling her foxglove. Or the way Milo had dragged an entire branch into the main hall and declared it his new throne, demanding someone “bedazzle it appropriately for a cat of royal lineage.”

Lyra had snorted so hard cider came out her nose.

“You let a cat boss you around?” Jace had teased, arms crossed as he leaned in the doorway that evening.

She’d looked him dead in the eye and replied, “Better than letting an Alpha think he’s in charge.”

He’d kissed her after that.

Long and slow.

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The kind that curled her toes and made her forget every scar.

By the third evening after the Pact's renewal, the town had gathered without formal plan or announcement. Word justspread, like smoke or magic. Tables were dragged into the square, string lights blinked to life across tree branches, and Tansy brewed enough cider to drown a mid-sized bear shifter.

The whole town turned up.

Calla passed out flower crowns.

Logan played the lute, terribly.

Even Mrs. Heller danced a little with the fey ambassador, who blushed so brightly he nearly glowed.

Lyra stood near the edge of the crowd, a cup of warm cider in her hands, watching the life she'd fought for unfold like a dream.

She barely noticed when Jace walked up beside her, until his hand found the small of her back—warm, familiar, anchoring.

He leaned close, his lips brushing her ear. "You good?"

She nodded, smile soft. "Better than."

He held up something shiny and crooked.

She blinked. “Is that... Milo’s crown?”

“It fell off when he was chasing the berry tart.”

They both turned toward the Keep steps, where Milo was currently screeching at a toddler shifter for daring to touch his “scepter” (which was, in fact, a very gnarled stick).

Lyra shook her head, laughter bubbling up. “I’m living in a cartoon.”

“You love it.”

“Ido.” She turned to face Jace. “I loveallof this.”

He watched her for a beat, eyes soft in that way they only got when he looked at her like she was the moon and every star that came with it.

“What?” she asked, heart fluttering.

“Nothing.” He leaned in, kissed her temple. “Just admiring my chaos witch.”

She nudged him. “Flatter me again and I might even dance with you.”

“Oh, nowthat’sa bribe.”

But she set her cider aside anyway, tugging him by the hand toward the center of the square. The music picked up—sweet and clumsy, full of charm—and they moved together like the world had narrowed to this single, perfect night.

Jace wasn’t much of a dancer.

Too stiff. Too focused.

But when she laughed and spun, he followed. When she stumbled into him, he caught her like gravity. And when their bodies pressed close under the glow of enchanted lanterns, neither of them pulled away.

“Hey,” she murmured against his chest.

“Yeah?”

“I think this is the first time I’ve ever felt like I belong somewhere.”

His arms tightened around her.

“Then it’s long overdue.”

She smiled, heart full.

She didn’t need spells or fire or fury. She just needed this.

Him.

Home.

42

JACE

The celebration melted behind them like sugar on the tongue.

Laughter still danced in the air. Music floated down the hill, soft and fading, wrapped in the scent of bonfire smoke and fresh cider. But Jace barely heard any of it—not with Lyra’s hand curled in his and her eyes catching the moonlight like twin spells he’d never escape.

They walked in silence for a while, shoes crunching over pine needles, the forest pressing in soft and familiar around them. He led her to the grove without words—he didn’t need them. This path was old. Sacred. Hidden beneath oaks and thick-bellied stars.

When they reached the clearing, moonlight spilled through the trees like liquid silver.

The grass was soft beneath their feet. Quiet surrounded them. Not the kind that made you feel alone.

The kind that made you feel held.

Jace stopped in the center, turned to her, and let himself really look.

She was radiant.

Barefoot now, flower crown tilted, her curls a mess of magic and moonshine. Her lips were flushed from laughing, and her eyes shimmered with something deeper than joy—belonging.

She tilted her head, teasing. “You gonna stare at me all night or kiss me?”

He stepped closer. “Can I do both?”

Her smile softened. “Always.”

He took her face in his hands and kissed her like a vow. Slow. Deep. The kind of kiss that rewrote everything that came before.

When he pulled back, their foreheads touched.

“I brought you here for a reason,” he said, voice low.

“I figured. You don’t do much without reason.”

“It’s shifter tradition. The claiming bite.” He paused. “It’s sacred to us. Permanent. No going back after this.”

Her fingers slid up his chest, curled around the collar of his shirt.

“I’m not going anywhere, Jace.”

His throat tightened.

“I need you to be sure.”

“I was sure the moment you yelled at Ezra like a feral dad wolf in the office.”

That made him laugh. “Romantic.”

She smirked. “I try.”

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Then her expression shifted—softened.

“I love you,” she said, quietly. “And I want this. All of it. You. Us. The bond.”

His heart, steady, strong, always calm, stumbled.

“I’ve waited my whole damn life to feel this,” he admitted. “To feel you. And if you’re sure...”

She stepped back, just enough to tilt her head, baring the curve of her neck.

“I’m yours,” she whispered.

The wolf surged inside him. Not with hunger, but with reverence. It wasn’t about possession.

It was about promise.

Jace’s hands tightened on her hips, the heat of her skin branding him through the thin fabric of her dress. Her breath hitched when his teeth grazed her earlobe. “Still think I’m the grumpy one?”

“Prove you’re not,” she challenged, fingers already working the buttons of his shirt with chaotic precision. A button pinged off a tree trunk.

He huffed against her throat. “That was my last clean henley.”

“I’ll mend it with starlight later.” Her laugh dissolved into a gasp as his mouth found the pulse point beneath her jaw.

Clothes fell, her flowy skirt snagging on a branch, his boots kicked into the ferns. When she arched against him, bare skin sliding against his, the world narrowed to the hitch of her breath and the way her nails scored his shoulders. He took his time, mapping every freckle and scar with lips and calloused hands, lingering where she shivered.

“Jace.” His name cracked in her throat as he slid into her, slow as honey.

The cool night air wrapped around them, a whisper against their flushed skin, as Jace moved with a reverence that bordered on sacred. Each thrust was a whispered vow, a slow dance under the watchful eyes of the ancient trees that stood as silent sentinels around them. The moonlight filtered through the canopy, casting a silver glow that seemed to hallow the ground beneath them, where their bodies entwined.

Lyra's silken limbs encircled him, her touch a brand that seared his soul, marking him as irrevocably as any rune. She matched his pace, her hips rising to meet his, a perfect counterpoint to his careful rhythm. Her breath came in short, sharp gasps that turned to cries as he filled her.

Jace's control was a tenuous thread, unraveling with each of her moans, each undulation of her body that threatened to undo him. He fought back the primal urge to claim her with the ferocity of his wolf, instead choosing to worship her with a tenderness that belied the storm raging within. Her fingers danced along his spine, her touch igniting a trail of fire that threatened to consume him.

As their tempo increased, the world around them blurred, the sounds of the forest fading into the background until all that remained was the sound of their mingled breaths and the rustle of leaves beneath them. Lyra's body tensed beneath his, her

inner walls tightening around him, a silent plea for release.

He pulled his face away only to catch her tongue in a twist of need. Then, his storm-grey locked onto moss-green. Her legs wrapped around his waist, pulling him deeper. “This isn’t just the bond talking, Lyra. You know that, right?”

She nipped his lower lip. “Your brooding’s sexier when you’re nottalking.”

He growled, hips snapping harder, and her breathless laugh tangled with moans as the rhythm turned fevered. The clearing smelled of crushed mint and sweat and her wild magic sparking between them. When her back bowed off the moss, he felt it—the cresting wave of her pleasure syncing with his own.

“Now,” she panted, fingers fisting in his hair. “Now.”

His teeth pierced her skin as they shattered together. Golden light erupted from her, illuminating the sweat-slick planes of his chest, the rune-like scars along his ribs. Magic thrummed between them, a live wire humming with shared breath and racing hearts.

With a groan, Jace surrendered to the demands of his body, driving into her with a newfound urgency. Her cries grew louder, wilder, as she arched into him, her fingers clutching at his shoulders with a desperation that mirrored his own. He could feel the precipice approaching, the sweet edge of oblivion that awaited them both.

Her breath hitched, her body quivering on the brink, and with a final, deep thrust, they tumbled over the edge together. The world exploded in a cascade of sensation, a rush of ecstasy that left them both spent and gasping for air.

In the aftermath, Jace lay beside her, their limbs still entangled, their hearts beating in unison. He pulled her close, her head resting against the steady thrum of his heart.

The bond between them pulsed with a warmth that chased away the chill of the night, a tangible reminder of the promise they had just sealed.

And as they lay there, surrounded by the magic of the forest and the unspoken vows that hung in the air between them, Jace knew that he had found his anchor in the storm of life.

She traced the bite mark with reverent fingers. “So... do I get to leave hickeys on you too, or is this a one-sided vampire situation?”

He collapsed beside her, pulling her against his chest. “You’ve literally set my paperwork on fire twice. I’m not giving you more weapons.”

Her laughter faded as he brushed a curl from her glowing face. The words lodged in his throat, sharper than any alpha command.

“Marry me.”

Her smile didn't waver, but her eyes went liquid. “Is that a question or an order, Alpha Montgomery?”

“A plea.” He pressed his forehead to hers, voice rougher than he intended. “From a man who's terrible at asking for things.”

Her kiss tasted like promises and stolen cider. “Of course.”

43

LYRA

It started with a cake tasting.

Which, really, was a lie, because Lyra didn't taste so much as inhale the entire first tray Calla had brought over.

“I'm just saying,” Lyra mumbled, mouth full of enchanted vanilla-lavender frosting, “if the wedding is just this cake and a nap, I'd still call it a success.”

“You are impossible,” Calla laughed, swatting her arm. “You're supposed to nibble, not devour like a pastry-gremlin.”

Lyra shrugged unapologetically, crumbs on her lip. “I'm celebrating. I just got claimed under a full moon by the hottest Alpha in the mountains. I deserve cake.”

Calla smirked. “You deserve a crown.”

“That too.”

Milo, perched on a velvet pillow atop the center table—lifted his head. “I deserve a crown. And a royal decree naming me Head of Magical Coordination for this ceremony.”

“You’re already wearing three necklaces and a pinecone tiara,” Lyra said.

“Accessories. Not authority.”

Calla rolled her eyes. “I swear if he starts demanding a staff of interns again, I’m putting a silence hex on him.”

Milo blinked. “Rude. Effective. But rude.”

Lyra chuckled, letting the joy soak in. For once, life wasn’t on fire. There were no missing Alphas. No rogue wolves. Just a flurry of white linens, potion-laced champagne plans, and a binder labeled *Operation: Moon Mate Matrimony*.

It was her binder.

She may have gotten a little carried away.

Okay, a lot.

But Jace hadn’t even blinked when she showed him. Just leaned in, tapped the checklist with his index finger, and murmured, “Whatever makes you happy, Lyra.”

Her heart had done a stupid little flip-flop at that word.

Lyra.

His mate.

Not just some chaos witch from out of town with flair for trouble and a tendency to hex coffee machines.

She washisnow. He was hers.

For eternity.

That afternoon, Lyra stood outside Moonfang Keep's front garden, watching as several of Jace's wolves dragged folding chairs through the clearing while Logan argued with a fairy baker about the difference between shimmer sugar and fairy dust.

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“No one wants to hallucinate during a wedding,” Logan snapped.

“It adds whimsy,” the baker argued.

“I’ll whimsy you into next week.”

From behind a line of lilac bushes, Calla popped out with a mischievous grin, holding a bundle of newly printed programs. “We’re gonna need more chairs. Sylvie’s whole coven is coming. And they traveldeep.”

Sylvie emerged behind her, cheeks flushed, her hand subtly brushing his. “They’re only coming because I told them I’d let them enchant the aisle with moon blooms.”

“They do know this isn’t their wedding, right?” Lyra asked, amused.

Sylvie smiled sweetly. “They’re aware. But also, slightly unhinged.”

Lyra grinned. “Perfect. They’ll fit right in.”

She turned back to the Keep, where Jace was stepping onto the porch, shirt sleeves rolled, clipboard in hand.

Sweet stars, he looked dangerous in daylight.

And yet he met her gaze like she was the only thing in it.

“Everything good out here?” he asked, walking over.

“Depends,” she teased. “You still sure you want to marry into this circus?”

He glanced around as Milo yelled at a pup to fetch him a spell-scroll, Logan argued with a squirrel shifter about the aisle runner, and Calla began enchanting floating lanterns with enough charm to rival a fireworks display.

“Without question,” he said. “I wantallof this.”

Lyra melted a little.

They stepped away from the chaos for a breath of peace behind the Keep, where the orchard trees bloomed early from spring magic and the wind rustled with whispers of laughter and life.

Jace leaned against the fence, eyes following a hawk overhead.

“You know,” he said quietly, “they really do love you.”

She blinked at him. “Who?”

“My pack. The town. All of it.”

Lyra looked down at her hands. “Sometimes I still feel like I’m playing dress-up in someone else’s fairy tale.”

“You’re not.” He turned her to face him. “You fought for this. Bled for it. Protected every soul here like it was your own. Youareone of us.”

She swallowed.

“I’m proud of you, Lyra. I trust you. And I don’t say that easy.”

Her eyes stung.

She stepped closer, burying her face in his chest. “You’re not so bad yourself, Montgomery.”

They stood like that until the light dipped low and the smell of mooncake filled the air.

And in that quiet moment, surrounded by magic, madness, and a town full of misfits who had become family.

Lyra finally let herself believe it.

She belonged.

Here. With him. Forever.

44

JACE

The full moon rose slow and sure, casting silver across the clearing like it had been waiting all along for this one night.

The same grove where he'd claimed her just weeks ago had been transformed. Lanterns floated gently among the branches like fireflies too dignified for fluttering. Wildflowers bloomed out of season, a spell woven by the coven in delicate hushes. Beneath their feet, a soft carpet of moss shimmered faintly, kissed by the magic of forest spirits who'd returned, curious and willing, to bless what was about to unfold.

Jace stood at the altar, breath steady, hands behind his back.

For once in his life, he wasn't worried.

The town was safe. His people were healing. And his mate was about to walk down that moonlit aisle.

Logan adjusted his collar behind him, muttering, "If you faint, I'll pretend I don't know you."

“I don’t faint,” Jace replied flatly.

“Good. Because she looks like a goddess in green.”

Jace turned sharply and forgot how to breathe.

Lyra walked between rows of enchanted trees, her arm looped through Calla’s, who wore her favorite sun-charmed shawl and proud tears in her eyes. The moment Lyra stepped into view, the forest hushed like it, too, wanted to watch.

She wore a deep emerald gown, the skirt kissed with gold thread that caught every glint of moonlight. Her curls tumbled freely down her back, a crown of blooming silverroot and starflowers nestled above her brow. Her smile—warm, unshaken, wide and wild—hit him like a punch to the chest.

He’d thought she was beautiful before. Now she was everything.

She met his gaze and didn’t look away.

Not when the coven began their song. Not when the spirits floated down in misty orbs around them. Not even when she reached him, placed her hand in his, and whispered, “Hey, grumpy.”

He swallowed. “Hey, witchling.”

Mirelle, the same elder who’d overseen the Moonlit Pact renewal, stood between them now, her hands raised in solemn grace.

“Tonight, beneath full moon and spell, we honor a bond not just of blood or name—but of soul. Two paths, once distant, now walk as one.”

The crowd was silent, save the occasional snuffle and the soft rustle of wings from the spirit realm.

Mirelle nodded at Jace.

He turned to Lyra, his voice rough but sure. “I wasn’t looking for you. Didn’t think I could have something like this—something like you. But now I don’t know how I ever breathed before you walked into my life.”

Her eyes shimmered.

“I will protect you. Stand beside you. Be your mate, your Alpha, your home.”

Mirelle turned to Lyra.

She took a breath, then reached up, brushing her fingers over his jaw. “You drive me absolutely mad.”

Laughter rippled through the crowd.

“But you also make me feel seen. Safe. Like I don’t have to tame the chaos to be loved.” Her hand slid into his. “You were never a distraction, Jace. You were the thing I didn’t know I was strong enough to want.”

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“I love you,” she added, softer now. “And I always will.”

Mirelle stepped back as the air around them brightened.

“By earth, by magic, by blood and bond—this union is sealed.”

The spirits rose like mist.

The moon dipped lower, as if bowing.

And Jace leaned in, sealing their promises with a kiss so full of truth it tasted like a lifetime.

The party afterward was nothing short of legendary.

Logan danced with a dryad. Dominic got caught kissing the different nymphs near the enchanted punch. Milo wore a new crown and insisted on giving a speech, which was mostly him complaining about not being allowed on the dessert table.

But none of it compared to dancing with Lyra beneath a full moon, her bare feet on his boots, her fingers curled behind his neck.

“We did it,” she whispered.

“Weareit,” he corrected.

She smiled and kissed him, slow and soft and infinite.

Later, as the crowd thinned and the lanterns dimmed, they slipped away—hand in hand, laughter in their wake.

Their honeymoon cottage stood at the forest's edge, tucked in a glade that hummed with warmth and privacy. Inside, the fire was already lit, and their favorite quilt lay folded at the foot of the bed.

Jace kicked the door closed behind them and turned to her.

“You ready?”

Lyra grinned. “Only if you are, Alpha.”

And as they disappeared into the glow of their forever, marked and mated, wrapped in love, magic, and everything they'd fought for.

The moon watched.

And the woods whispered.

And Celestial Pines dreamed on.