



Half Moon Curse

Author: Jada Cox

Category: Romance, Paranormal

Description: A future alpha.

A jealous sister.

And a witch's twisted bargain...

My twin sister Selena is the charmed one, and she always gets what she wants. Like Orion. Charming, hot-as-hell, future pack alpha Orion. They've been dating for years, but the ceremony is coming, and we all know the Blue Flower Moon will reveal that Orion is my sister's fated mate.

Problem is, Goddess help me, I love Orion too.

Between my shame of betrayal and this unrelenting longing, I have nowhere to turn. So I ignore the warnings about the sorceress Cersey and drink her potion, desperate to believe her promise that it will rid me of my obsession with Orion. But it fails—I only want him more. I decide that night my deal with Cersey is off. She didn't hold up her end, so why should I give her what she wants?

Then the impossible happens. Orion is revealed as my mate at the coupling ceremony and everything I ever wished for falls in my lap. But my euphoria can't last. I secretly wonder if Cersey has something to do with this, especially when she shows up after a rogue werewolf invades our territory, attacks Orion, and abducts our alpha.

Suddenly, it's all falling apart. If I reveal my bargain with the witch, Selena may never forgive me, Orion will surely reject me, and I don't even know for sure if the witch is at the center of the war that is brewing.

But if I don't come clean, will it spell the end of everything?

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ORION

Selena's wide smile was the brightest thing I'd seen from her in a long time. It made me wish I'd seen her more this past week. But she had asked for space, and I was not one to deny her anything she wanted.

"I'm so glad you're here," she beamed. I pressed a quick kiss to her forehead. "Sorry, it's been a while. Dad's been... insufferable."

Her face twisted, and I regretted bringing up my dad instantly. I couldn't tell if it was because he didn't approve of us or if it reminded her of her late father.

I quickly changed the subject, realizing she was holding something. "What do you have there?"

She looked at the paper in her hand and quickly clutched it to her chest. "Come inside, I'll tell you. But first, tell me about your day."

Diana passed us on the way inside the house. She looked at her sister with a slight frown before ducking into the kitchen, where it smelled like someone was working on dinner.

As Selena and I climbed the stairs, I began to regale her with the events of the day. "There was a big meeting today, about the border. Jesse got in a tizzy, and I'm sure my dad just pissed him off even more."

Selena's responding chuckle sounded distracted as she opened the door to her room. I

popped on the end of her bed.

She lowered herself onto the mattress, waiting for me to continue.

“Then Dad and I got into an argument, of course. He disapproves of me coming here, as always.” I rolled my eyes.

She tilted her head, and her frown was sympathetic. “What started it this time?”

I hesitated for a moment and then decided she should know the truth. “Humans. Not locals, we don’t think. There are a few inside our territory.”

Her eyebrows shot up, along with her posture. “Okay.”

She paused, but before I could explain further, she added, “I don’t understand. Why argue about humans?”

I suppressed the now-familiar urge to sigh. I needed to be patient. I didn’t want this conversation to unravel. “We just disagree on how to handle the situation. It doesn’t matter anymore.” My eyes went to the paper still in her hands. “What did you have to tell me?”

Her bright smile returned, settling some of the unease in my stomach. “I solved our problem.” She smoothed the paper out on the bed.

“What problem?” I asked, craning my neck around to see the paper.

“The coupling ceremony, of course.”

I saw the stationary logo: University of California, Berkeley. I didn’t see the connection between the university and the Blue Flower Moon. My brow furrowed.

“You’re going to have to explain.”

She rolled her eyes. “It’s so obvious—”

“Dinner’s ready!” Terra called from downstairs.

"Okay, Mom!" Selena called back.

A reprieve. I didn’t know where this was headed, but lately I couldn’t seem to say anything right. Selena was grieving and I wanted to be her rock, not cause her more anxiety.

I kissed her furrowed brow and led her downstairs to join Terra and Diana at the table. The meal was simple and hearty, but something was missing. The clatter of silverware against dinner plates was too loud. It looked like there was some intense ritualistic study of plates happening.

Awkward.

I swallowed a mouthful of potatoes. “Dinner is delicious, Mrs. Asher,” I said.

Terra smiled, meeting my eyes and nodding her head toward the girls. “Diana has a way with cooking, whether or not she wants to admit it.”

Diana continued her intensive plate studies, jaw seeming to clench at the failed praise.

Selena spoke up, “How was your first day back at training?”

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Diana paused before answering, eyes still downcast. “Fine. Cara took us mountain climbing.” Then a brief, shy smile flitted across her lips. “I have an assignment. I’m going on patrol in the morning.”

Selena frowned beside me. “What are you patrolling for?”

Diana did not immediately answer, her fork freezing halfway skewered through her chicken. “We are just securing the borders.” I was impressed with her discreet answer, but Selena would not be put off. She crossed her arms. “Securing it from what?” she asked in a flat voice.

Diana’s eyes finally flickered up to meet her twin’s. Her voice was soft, but her answer was firm. “Humans, Selena.”

It was enough to trigger a reaction. Selena’s voice increased in volume. “Humans live here. Why do we need to secure our border from them?”

Diana strained beneath Selena’s intensifying gaze, but she remained calm. “Because they are on our land.”

“Do we not go to Half Moon Bay sometimes to trade with humans? To get things we need?” Selena challenged.

I tried to reach for Selena’s hand under the table. She twisted her fingers away, so I tried a calming hand on her knee instead. “That’s different. We don’t go without permission from Alpha Nathaniel.”

Selena turned her wild eyes on me. “Must we ask the alpha’s permission for everything? Just to walk into town? Or to trade with humans who, by the way, wouldn’t stand a rabbit’s chance in a fight against any one of us?”

Shadows of an old argument loomed inside her accusation. Heat began to rise in my cheeks, but I did not want to have this argument in front of her family. “Please, Selena. We’re not attacking anyone. We just want to make sure they mean no harm.”

“Until Jesse sees something he doesn’t like? Until Noah makes a stupid stumble into a bush? Howblind...” She stood up suddenly, scrapping the chair back. She took a heated breath and started again, “Humans aren’t dangerous. In fact, they are busy creating extraordinary things while we stay stuck in the dark ages. Why aren’t we spending more time with them? Learning from them?” Her eyes gave a dark flicker across the table to their mother. “Maybe Father would still be alive...”

Diana stood up smoothly, crossing her arms. Unlike Selena’s wild rage, the elder twin remained calm but steady, like a mountain against a storm. “Selena, that’s unfair.”

“Is it?” Selena continued, her face turning bright pink. “Or is it unfair to Father that we did not do everything in our power to save him—human healers at the town hospital, for example?” I stayed seated. Tears welled in Terra’s eyes. Diana didn’t move.

Selena looked directly at Diana. “Do you even care? You’ve hardly said anything since he’s been gone.”

That was it. A visible change descended upon Diana. Her arms fell to her sides, and her lips twisted in disgust. She took one look at their mother, who turned away from the outburst, and marched out of the house, the front door slamming behind her.

In turn, Selena fled, racing up the stairs. I followed her, catching her bedroom door

before it slammed in my face.

“Selena, you can’t keep blaming his death on them. I’m sorry, I know you’re in pain—”

Suddenly, Selena’s mouth crashed into mine. Stunned, my body responded instantly, matching her deep intensity. My wolf growled as Selena clawed at my hair and raked her nails across my neck.

I wanted her—I always wanted her. But her familiar, intoxicating taste mixed with a sour scent of desperation. It woke me up and stopped me cold. I pulled away, untangling myself from her.

“We can leave,” she said breathlessly, pressing her body forward to mine, holding me close as if worried I’d try to escape.

But I couldn’t make sense of her words. “Leave?”

“Yes, we should leave. Start a new life. Before the Blue Flower Moon. We don’t have to go through the coupling ceremony. We can stay together.”

I blinked, struggling to understand what she was suggesting. “Where would we go?”

“Anywhere. Actually...” She stepped back, and that wild fury morphed into a new excitement that vibrated her hands as she reached again for those papers.

“UC Berkeley is having an open enrollment night for rural-based students. I’ve been preparing for a long time, Orion. We can totally do this. We’ll go there, we’ll study, we’ll make a new life. Together. I’ve arranged everything. They have this admission process for, what’d they call it...” She was scanning the pages in her hand, “nontraditionalstudents.” She looked up and beamed, drawing a quick inhale and

continuing, “And we will meet with advisors who—”

She did not see me shaking my head until I interrupted, “No, Selena.”

Mid-sentence, she went still.

“You know I can’t do that.” This was insane.

“You can’t do that either. What would I tell my father? I am the pack’s future alpha, for Goddess’ sake. You’re our future seer.” I took another breath and said finally, “We have a responsibility to the pack.”

She was frozen, and I did not regret the edge in my response. She’d gone too far. But I was sorry that I’d extinguished the first light I’d seen in her since her father’s illness. The university papers fluttered to the floor. I felt like a jerk.

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I reached for her hands, stepping closer.

“I know you’re nervous about the ceremony. But what you’re saying doesn't makesense.”

Her wounded expression morphed into a glare as she seemed to realize something new. “So you lied?” she challenged. “You’ve never wanted to leave the compound.”

I sighed, knowing what this was about. It was one specific conversation from years ago, a night when Dad and I had an epic argument over Mom’s death. “That was...” I stammered, unable to find the right words. “No, I didn’t lie. I don’t lie. And no, I don’t want to leave the compound.”

How could she not see the madness in this plan? “Pride and Pack are everything, Selena. You know that. It is my honor and my duty to serve. I don’t intend to abandon my family, my pack, or my home.”

We stood there staring at each other. A stalemate. “Selena, think about this. You don’t really want to leave your family and your home to venture into some foreign world where you’d have to hide who you are, right? It’s one thing to play at human interaction in Half Moon Bay, but leaving the compound to live on your own in a world that is all humans all the time? Who would you even be without your pack?”

I pressed her hands together, folding them in mine. “Listen, the fates are with us. We must have faith in our traditions. The Blue Flower Moon will reveal what we already know, the coupling ceremony will put my father’s concerns to rest and show the entire pack the truth—we are meant to be together. Please, Selena.”

She slid her hands out of mine. For the first time, she didn't argue, only shook her head numbly. "I think you should go home."

What was happening? I got that she was struggling with grief and insecurity, but this was too much. The abject dismissal, like she'd already given up on us because I didn't share her abandonment fantasy, flared a new heat inside of me. One that begged for release, that wanted to storm off and howl into the night. I was dangerously close to erupting, so I stepped back and escaped into the night air.

Outside, I replayed the conversation in my head. It was rude to leave without thanking Terra for the meal and saying goodbye, but my pulse throbbed with frustration. The forest beckoned. I was ready to shift, to pounce and run through the trees. I rounded the corner of the Asher's house to heed the call, but something stopped me dead in my tracks.

Diana was kneeling on the grass, her face upturned to the moon. She was the picture of serenity. As I watched, her peaceful stillness somehow flowed into me, and the irritation drained from my body.

How could twins be so different? One fiery and flippant. The other steady and tranquil.

She had handled the disagreement with Selena with such control, such grace and dignity, as if she was not also grieving for her father.

I moved slowly, with caution, trying not to disturb Diana. But a misplaced step snapped a twig. Suddenly, she was looking my way.

Busted.

She whipped herself to her feet, a warrior at the ready.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to intrude,” I said, raising my hands in a peaceful gesture. Diana relaxed.

“I hate that Selena said those things to you. It was definitely undeserved.”

She drew into herself, looking at the ground. “She is in pain, and people in pain say things they don’t mean. I forgive her.”

I took another step toward her in wonder. “How can you be so calm about everything?”

Her eyes flickered up to meet mine, and for a spellbinding moment, I realized everything about her. She was calm on the outside because she must be, but inside she was a tangle of more. She was a puzzle, a tantalizing labyrinth of strength and power and something else I could not quite fathom. I loved puzzles.

She looked away, the trees capturing her gaze for the moment. “I strive to be a great warrior for the pack, and the best warrior controls their anger.” When she turned to meet my gaze again, she had a half smirk on her face. “Unless you’re Jesse, of course.”

“Of course!” I mimicked Jesse’s bravado, “The greatest of them all!”

“Just ask him,” she quipped.

We laughed together, and the last of my remaining anger ebbed away.

Selena might have been fire, but Diana was a vast ocean, with all its healing power. In her sparkling eyes, I could see the moon and stars dance just beyond our grasp. I could smell the salty breeze of the sea blowing in from the coast.

A sudden urge seized me, and before I realized it, my face angled in her direction, like her tide drawing me closer, a siren beckoning me to the sea.

But a flicker of flame stopped me. Selena. I pulled back just in time, before I could complete the betrayal. Diana's eyes were wide, and I realized I'd probably overwhelmed or frightened her with my advances.

Words tangled on my tongue, but I managed to choke out, "Have a good evening." Then I fled to my Jeep.

DIANA

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What was that?

I watched Orion retreat for a stupefying moment before I realized I was not breathing. Then I felt my heart racing, a thready pulse fluttering at my throat. I could still feel the warmth of his breath on my lips. My body was on fire, like he was the blazing sun that could burn everything in its path.

I yearned to follow him, feeling like there was a cord tied around my heart. Orion tightened and tugged on that cord with our--what the hell was it?--our near kiss. That was it, wasn't it? Orion was about to kiss me...

There's no way.

He was as honorable as his Alpha father. He was faithful to my sister, Selena. He'd loved her for how many moons? So many moons. All the while, I'd secretly watched them from the shadows, my heart filled with jealous longing.

No way he was trying to kiss me.

I buried my face in my hands, stifling a cry that threatened to burst from my chest. This couldn't be normal grief. I felt alone, confused, out of control. And it wasn't just about Dad's death. But who could I turn to? Mom was burdened enough. And besides, I was her brave girl, her fighter. Just like your father, she'd always said.

And Selena. My twin, my dearest friend, there was nothing we didn't know about each other our whole lives. Until now. We used to be inseparable. Dad called us two halves of the Sterling Moon. She was smart and intuitive, passionate and beguiling; I

was tough, disciplined, and diplomatic. If together we were the supermoon of supermoons, what did that make us now?

Truth was, we started drifting apart long before our father's bizarre illness.

The Hare Moon—that's when it started.

The Hare Moon celebration was when we claimed our place and privilege within the pack. That was the day I was officially accepted into the pack's guard training program. And Selena was, of course, recognized officially as the future pack seer. That was also the day we were no longer girls, we were women. For me, that meant I got to train with others in the guard, to learn how to really fight. While I was doing that, Selena was changing too, apparently learning how to bat her eyelashes and swing her hips. I may not have noticed at the time, but the other wolves sure did. Case in point—Orion. Charming, honorable, hot-as-hell, future Alpha Orion.

I guess it was only natural. We were growing up. But we were also growing apart. She never talked about Orion with me. I'd ask, of course, but she'd just flash a sly grin or giggle. I'd mask my jealousy with a scoff or an eye roll. And then Dad got sick. And then Orion made a joke, we laughed, and he cocked his head and leaned closer and I could almost taste his lips against my mouth...

And then left me, alone and helpless against this aching need.

This was more than a crush on my sister's boyfriend. If I was being honest, it had grown out of control. No amount of sparring or mountain runs or mantras could deflect my ever-growing, agonizing yearning for him. It was time I admitted it.

Goddess help me, I'm in love with Orion.

I felt sick. It was totally masochistic. The coupling ceremony was coming, and we all

knew the Blue Flower Moon would reveal that Orion was my sister's fated mate.

I'd never felt so alone as I did then. Half of a Sterling Moon was just a half moon. I was like a lost omega. I had nowhere to turn. In my desperation, a new thought bubbled up. I tried to ignore it, but no matter how I tried to push it under, it kept popping back up.

The sorceress, Cersey.

The only reason I even knew about Cersey was because Mom had forbidden us from seeking her out when Selena and I were little girls. I was not a rule breaker, but my loyalty to pack and family was more important than a child's rule. And my obsession with Orion felt like an existential threat. The idea wouldn't let go.

Maybe the witch had real power. Maybe some charm or enchantment could squelch my desire, make me happy for my sister, let me feel whole again.

Before I knew it, my feet had carried me through the forest and away from the compound. I would go to her, release my burden, and resume my life. I tried to ignore the sense of foreboding that added extra weight to my trek through the trees.

Her hut sat in the midst of a wooded eyot, a small islet in one of the rivers that eventually emptied into the harbor of Half Moon Bay. When I reached the riverbank, I could see the overgrown cottage shining in the moonlight through the break of trees. A thin, swinging bridge connected the bank to a small dock on the witch's island. I hesitated, straining to see signs of life inside.

Just then, a small light flickered through one of her circle windows. The silhouette of a woman appeared and creaked open the rustic window, the universal sign of an invitation. My heart hammered in my chest. I'd heard stories about werewolves who sought counsel from Cersey. Eli mentioned it some time ago in training. And despite

her warnings, I knew Mom used to visit the witch regularly.

It would be fine. I would be fine. Everything was fine.

I pushed aside the climbing tendrils of doubt and silently practiced what I would say when she opened the door, how I would ask for what I needed. I had to be clear, truthful, and precise.

My thing with Orion was unhealthy, and yes, I resented Selena for dating him in the first place, but that wasn't why I was there. I needed to be rid of my attraction to Orion. How could I earn my place as Cara's second in command with him always around? Orion was a distraction, he threatened my place in the pack as guard and protector. If she could do it, I'd beg the witch to rip this bleeding heart out of my chest so it could feel no pain, suffer no weakness.

But I'd been around Mom's magic enough to know that's not how this worked. I hoped.

Heart pounding, I steeled myself and crossed the bridge with a mask of confidence. When I reached the front door, I knocked three times. A moment's spark of fear and uncertainty seized me, and I made to turn on my heel—

A clear alto voice called out, "Come in."

Lichen and ivy covered the cottage, but the one-room dwelling was pristine inside. The hearth on the back wall crackled with an inviting fire, but I hadn't noticed any smoke curling from the chimney outside. A small wooden table, enough to seat three, sat in the middle of the room. A woman sat in a chair facing me as I stood in the doorway.

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I barely had a moment to take in her long, languid appearance, the high cheekbones, the curling ginger hair. I quickly averted my eyes, realizing it was rude to look upon a witch without permission.

“You... are one of Terra’s daughters,” she realized in a voice that was soft yet subtly powerful.

I took that as invitation enough and peeked up to see sparkling green eyes considering me. I had a feeling she could see right through me. Perhaps she could see every thread of my history, every fear I’d ever tried to bury. I swallowed to ease my dry throat. “Are you the witch?”

She gave a soft snort through her nose. “It is normally polite to call someone by their name. Mine is Cersey. And you...?”

“Diana.” I looked down again, forcing my hands to remain at my sides and resisting the urge to pick at my fingernails. “I am sorry if I am bothering you.”

“Please, sit.”

Wood scraped against wood, and the chair closest to me turned as if all by itself. I cautiously took the seat.

“I have no other clients at the moment,” she said with an edge of boredom. Her finger drew circles in the air, and a tea kettle appeared next to some mugs. “Have some chamomile tea, and tell me why you’ve come to see me, dear.”

I did not reach for the offered mug, recalling a vague memory of Mom telling us to never accept food or drink from a witch. I smiled politely instead, working to tame my chaotic thoughts into linear sentences.

“Normally, when a werewolf is troubled, they visit their pack seer,” I began slowly.

Her smile was slow, warm, comforting. “It can make things difficult if the seer happens to be your mother.”

I nodded, taking a deep breath. The warm smell of chamomile and honey made me more certain of myself. “I want to prove myself as a great warrior for the pack.”

“Like your father,” Cersey nodded.

“Um. Yes,” I said, surprised. How do I say this? I started over. “I am in the guard. I don’t want to be accused of emotions getting in the way of loyalty, honor, and discipline. I need to prove my strength and—”

Cersey frowned, “And here I thought I smelled some heartbreak in the air when you arrived.”

How could she smell my heartbreak? My tongue went sour at the description. That was beside the point. I was there to be whole and strong. I knew I must be truthful, but I did not want to admit that I was lovesick. “There is someone...”

Her frown lifted into a wolfish smile. “There usually is.”

I paused, making sure I had the strength to say the name without faltering. “Orion. He is... currently dating my sister.”

“Orion. Alpha Nathaniel's boy.”

I nodded.

“You want him for yourself.” she surmised. Without waiting for my response, she rose to her feet and took three smooth steps to the cauldron hanging in her hearth.

“No!” She had it all wrong. “I don’t want these feelings. I want you to take this feeling from me.”

Cersey’s movements stilled, and she turned to me slowly with a puzzled expression. I imagined this was not a request she received often. “You don’t want to be with Orion?” she asked.

A trick question. Of course I wanted to be with Orion. I hesitated.

She raised an eyebrow, making her predatory smile appear a bit more amused. “What’s holding you back?”

“Selena.” The name escaped my lips as a sharp hiss, and I slapped my hand over my mouth in shame. I didn’t mean to utter my sister’s name with so much poison.

Cersey considered me for a moment. “It is natural for sisters to be rivals.”

I lowered my hands, hardly trusting myself. “I do not want us to be enemies.”

“You care for your sister,” she surmised in a clipped tone. “If you want to continue to do what is best for her, you must not deny yourself these feelings. To take out your heart would erase the bond and compassion you hold for her. If you want to be rid of these feelings, you should instead confront them like the warrior you are.”

I felt the threat of tears rising. “How?”

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“The Blue Flower Moon is soon.” She spoke slowly, regarding me with care. “If there was a way to have both, take Orion for yourself while preserving your sister’s happiness, would you not take it?”

Impossible. The witch was mad. “I really don’t see how that’s possible.”

She turned to the cauldron with fresh purpose. The fire roared anew as thick, oily scents coated the air. Cersey flicked her fingers this way and that, summoning herbs and tinctures from the cabinet. I craned my neck to glimpse the concoction she was making.

“I know how to help you, dear Diana. Before I give you my instructions, let us speak of your payment.”

“Payment?” I tried to contain my panic. I hadn’t thought about payment and I didn’t have any human money. We bartered with the humans in town. The pack had no need for money or barter; we took care of each other. I shrugged uncomfortably.

Cersey barked a laugh, and the sound made a light echo. “Of course, dear. Payment. A bargain. I do something for you, and in turn, you can do something for me. That is fair, is it not?”

It was fair. “But what can I do for you?”

“It is very simple. Inside your werewolf compound, there is an amulet that once belonged to me. All I want is its safe return.”

“Oh.” That did not seem unreasonable. “Where is it, and—”

Before I could ask why she didn’t go and get it herself, Cersey said, “Your beta took it from me to give to his alpha. It is probably in Nathaniel’s possession.”

Something wasn’t right. She was asking me to take something from the alpha? To steal from Orion’s father?

The odor in the room changed as Cersey tended her caldron.

Without more, I couldn’t work out why Jesse would have taken the amulet in the first place, but maybe I didn’t need to know. I was suddenly feeling warm, and eager. “And in return?”

Cersey turned to me, at last, and I watched the fire settle to a normal size. Cersey held a small glass vial in front of me, which contained maybe an ounce of dark liquid. “Look through the glass to the fire,” she said. In the liquid floated an ethereal shape, a symbol illuminated by the firelight, a First Quarter Moon. Or a Third Quarter Moon. Hard to say which.

“Take this,” she said, handing me the vial. “As you well know, the half moon is incomplete; it stands on the precipice of completion or undoing.”

“It’s an insult.” I quipped. “Means foolish, or incapable, or feeble.” What had I gotten myself into?

Cersey smiled ruefully. “I suppose the residents of Half Moon Bay would like to disagree, but of course you’re right. If they knew the true meaning of their town’s current name they’d change it again. Always changing their names, those benighted children...” Cersey seemed to be muttering to herself. I started to back away. The last thing I needed was a half-moon spell that—

She took my free hand in hers. “Diana, dear, the half moon is neither good nor bad. Not really. It sometimes represents a crossroads. Similar to the situation you currently find yourself in. Yes?” I nodded slowly. “The half moon can also stand for hope, potential, a promise of wholeness as it moves towards its full brightness.”

She let go of my hand and motioned to the vial.

“Drink it, and you will find your destined path illuminated before you.”

I held it up to the fire again and watched the symbol hang in the liquid. “It’ll tell me what to do?”

“Every decision remains yours. It will not rob you of control. Merely, it helps shine a light on some of your confusion.”

I was mesmerized by the floating symbol in the liquid.

Cersey made a quick motion with her fingers, beckoning me. Her voice clapped, “drink!”

My hands seemed to move of their own accord, and my head tilted back to swallow the murky contents of her potion. The bitter elixir trailed a burning path against my tongue, down my throat. Instantly my senses, sounds, scents, and sights all were enhanced, sharpened to the point of pain. My head swam.

And just like that, I found myself outside the witch’s cottage on the other side of the bridge. I glanced around. The place was dark, with no fire or light to be seen. Shaken, I started back to the compound with only a waxing moon to guide my path.

ORION

Even after a week, things hadn't improved much with Selena. She hardly ever left her house, leaving me to visit as often as I could to make things right. The first few days she didn't speak to me at all, slamming the door in my face before I could even get a word out. I worried that she had seen me with Diana that night, standing so close. There were few excuses that would explain our proximity.

On the third day, when she saw me through the screen door, she didn't automatically shut it in my face. She glared, arms crossed. "What do you want?"

I leaned against the door frame with a defeated sigh. "I want you, Selena. That's why I'm here, it's why I've come here every day."

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“You don’t want me enough to leave the compound with me.”

“Why would I want to leave the compound?” I asked, trying to restrain the exasperation in my voice. “Our families are here. Our pack is here. Our life is here. My duty is here—”

“You’d haveme there,” she hissed, as if it made all the difference.

I didn’t want to imply that she wouldn’t be enough if we were together, homeless and starving in some foreign place. Surrounded by humans who could never understand us. Humans who were enemies. Selena, with her pure heart, struggled to understand just how dangerous humans were.

“Is it not enough to have me here in the compound?” I asked carefully.

Her face fell at that. “The Blue Flower moon is almost here, Orion. And what if the fates don’t bind us to each other? Or if we’re bonded to someone else?”

I frowned. I knew this was the heart of it. My father never let me forget it. “And what if the Blue Flower Moon confirms for the entire pack that we are fated mates?” I asked in a gentle voice.

Her glare softened and she looked more vulnerable than I had seen her in a long time. “True mates are so rare.”

She wasn’t wrong. I reached for her hands and kissed the tops of her knuckles. “We will never know for certain until we do. I’d rather face that knowledge than live with

the question always keeping us in its shadow. But of all the things I do know, I know my feelings for you are real. I doubt the Goddess would be so cruel as to spite us on the Blue Flower Moon.”

Finally, she relented to my words, opening the screen door so I could wrap my arms around her and pull her into my chest.

* * *

I walked with Selena, hand in hand, through the forest on our way to the coast. The KUA pack had lived in this ancient forest on the San Francisco peninsula for thousands of moons. It felt good to breathe it in.

The Blue Flower Moon illuminated Kuksu Beach and we could see how many were already gathered for the coupling ceremony. Kuksu was a pocket beach, secluded and difficult for humans to reach, but there was also an enhancement that hid the spot from human eyes. The energy of the group was electric, and the salty breeze was full of promise. This was not just a pack ceremony. Every werewolf of age within the Ohlone Achcho territories would flock to Kuksu Beach to take part.

“Do you recognize anyone on the beach from the OA?” Selena asked distractedly.

I thought I did, and I started pointing out a few people and telling stories about when we’d met, until I realized that she wasn’t really paying attention. She looked apprehensive. But the excitement energized me and my skin prickled with anticipation. The urge to shift was strong, like a tense spring coiled in my belly, ready to release. Ready to surrender to my wolf’s primal urges.

A small squeeze of my hand held me back. Selena looked away, gazing longingly at the forest behind us.

“Hey,” I turned her chin towards me. Her skin was searing against mine. “Have faith in us.”

But Selena, persistent as she was, couldn’t let it go. “We don’t have to do this. Let’s go to the lake, for a midnight swim—”

I shook my head, confident that we could end the night together and go for a midnight swim in the ocean. But not until the ritual was completed. “You know I can’t. My dad...”

I trailed off, knowing how she hated these arguments about my dad. About duty. But she had to know; she had to understand what was most important.

“I am the future alpha. You are the seer’s daughter. Surely this would be a match to please the Goddess.”

Her hand released mine, and she stepped back. “Diana is also the seer’s daughter.”

My entire body tensed at her words. I’d done well to avoid Diana since that night, but when I fell asleep, it was difficult to ignore the dreams, which had started coming more and more. I sealed them away from myself and, of course, from Selena. I could not breathe a word of how my belly tugged me toward the beach, even now, in search of her sister, a balm and relief I imagined every night.

I pushed aside these feelings and focused on the fire before me, the warmth of Selena’s heated gaze. I poked her in the ribs. “Diana didn’t inherit your mother’s magic like you.”

She swatted my hands away. “Yes, my magic. Shall I go collect river rocks and read your fortune?”

I did not want to hear more of her anger, her protests. I wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her into my chest. It was the best way to silence her, to catch her off guard. I offered her a final, parting kiss. “This isn’t goodbye,” I promised.

When I pulled back, her frown was telling enough. She didn’t believe me.

When we reached the site on the beach, marked by torches staked in the sand, I put enough distance between us to make it appear as though we’d arrived separately. A silly but necessary show for my father, who waited in the center of the circle of torches. It wasn’t that no one knew of my relationship with Selena; I was just tired of hearing Dad’s protests.

Our seer, Terra, stood next to our alpha. I caught sight of Jesse, Eli, and Daniel at a distance. As the hour drew closer to midnight, the tittering mateless fell silent, tightening the circle around alpha and seer, and Terra began the ritual.

“The Goddess demands loyalty, honor, and obeisance of us all...”

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I kept my eyes trained on Selena across the circle. She hugged herself and refused to meet my gaze.

“You have gathered for a chance to find that sacred union we so desperately crave, to continue our line and our existence for futures to come.”

Terra visited each participant in the circle, her ceremonial athame drawn. When she stopped at me, I saw through the flickering darkness a stray smile. Despite her duties as the seer, she never discouraged Selena and me. I wondered why, especially when she usually agreed with my dad about everything.

But, as she dragged the tip of the knife across my palm, I held my breath. The sharp edge produced a wet line of blood, and I clenched my teeth against the sting. The seer hurried to the next awaiting werewolf.

When everyone had bled, she returned to the center, chanting her lines and holding her hands up to the full moon. Everyone was quiet, holding their breath.

Next to me, a spark blossomed in the palm of a young werewolf visiting from one of the OA territories. It rose slowly above his head and floated across the clearing. Moony-eyed, he followed it. From the other side of the fire, an identical spark rose, and the two lights shot toward one another, coming together in a shimmering shower of sparks. Under the blaze of light, he stood with his new mate. They regarded each other, eyes alight with wonder. We in the circle watched in awe as the couple joined hands, leaned in, and kissed.

More sparks erupted after that. Couples bathed in glittery sparks were hurrying, hand

in hand, into the forest shadows to enjoy their first moments of forever together. I scanned those remaining in the circle, searching for her.

A sudden jolt of energy seized me.

My vision flooded with a scintillating haze wrapped in silver starlight, and a strange, mesmerizing music, like rain falling on crystal chimes, filled my head. The orbs summoned me, pulled me forth with a silent command I was compelled to obey. The sensation of gritty sand under my feet was the single tether that kept me bound to the earth as I reached for my mate, the heavens in her gaze.

All traces of agitation and apprehension melted away. There was only the silky sensation of being wrapped in mint and honey. Embraced. Cool and sweet and home. My shoulders opened and my chest relaxed, my whole self expanding, and I had the sense that I could finally breathe. Like every other breath had been held in anticipation for this single moment.

I gave no resistance to the impulse to kiss her. The action was familiar, instinctual, imperative. And then I tasted those sacred lips, and a vast world of realization opened up to me. I would run miles, fight to my last breath, and burn the world down just for her.

When I finally broke for air to survey my love wholly at this moment, I was met with the exquisite sight of who the fates had always known was my one, true mate. Of course, it was her, Diana.

DIANA

My morning started like any other. Wake up early, shower, get dressed, devour a quick breakfast, and avoid Selena. It was an easy thing to do. Selena rarely woke up as early as I did, and so I had the bonus of her equally avoiding me.

Avoidance was my thing now. I avoided all of my favorite people lately.

I'd been over it in my head a thousand times. My trip to Cersey's felt unreal, like a dream. I'd been certain before I crossed back into the compound that her vile potion hadn't worked. By the time I got home, my longing for Orion was unbearable.

Like I could actually bargain with a sketchy old hag to rid me of my obsession with Orion. How could I have been so half-mooned? I decided right then that there was no bargain. She didn't hold up her end, so I owed her nothing. "That's fair," I mumbled to no one.

But then, at the ceremony, the unimaginable happened. Orion was bound to me. In one moment, the goddess answered my deepest longing. The next moment we had stolen away to a private spot on Kuksu Beach Trail together, and I was swept up in a torrent of elation, bliss, rhapsody. My lips, the nape of my neck, and tips of my earlobes tingled where he had kissed, nuzzled, and nipped, and I grew warm remembering the feel of his hard bulge pressing against my middle.

The shame hit me only when Orion and I were walking back to the beach and I caught sight of Selena, alone and crumpled on the ground near an extinguished torch. She must have felt my gaze. She looked up and saw us just as I tugged on Orion's hand to follow me in the other direction. Orion was oblivious, his eyes never left my face, but I couldn't take my eyes off my sister's. In the bright moonlight, her expression was marred with pain, disgust, and betrayal. She stood slowly, brushing off the sand and watching us. In that moment, I knew she'd never forgive me. I wanted to run to her, to explain, but I was frozen, my hand attached to the love of her—of my—life. All I could do was watch her turn and walk away.

That is when I thought of Cersey. As Orion stroked my hair, held my face, planted kisses on my cheeks, my lips, my neck, chattering sweet promises of our love, our future together, the ground seemed to fall out and I was spiraling. Orion steadied me,

chuckling and blaming my dizziness on the trance, an after-effect of the ritual, like I was a delicate flower. He led me to sit down, and I stiffened as he pulled me towards him.

I was overwhelmed by it all; I let him think that was it. I couldn't tell him I was puzzling something horrible together, something unthinkable.

What if all of this was because...Cersey?

While other couples were bemoaning the requirement that we return to our family's homes on the night of the ritual, I was relieved to hear my mother's call to come back to the circle. Orion groaned, but I made a comment about tradition and duty. To that, he smiled broadly, then kissed me with such devoted tenderness that my heart nearly burst on the spot.

Soon after, I was back in my own bed, not sleeping, going over and over what had transpired at the witch's cottage that night. The potion. The amulet. She'd known about Dad. And me. She'd known the ceremony was happening on the Blue Flower Moon. Why did she need me to get the amulet? Why did they take the amulet in the first place? She'd started the potion as soon as I mentioned Orion. She knew Orion was Alpha Nathaniel's son. The amulet. The potion. The bargain...

By morning I still hadn't worked much of it out, but I was almost convinced of one thing. My bond with Orion, our fated coupling, was not the doing of Goddess—this was Cersey's magic. Probably.

I'd also determined that Cersey was many things, but she was no charlatan. She was a powerful sorceress, and I was a pawn in her game. She was also a liar. On that beach last night I had no choice. No control at all. Worse yet, I was powerless to change it.

Now what? I couldn't take back the ritual, the moment we were taken by the trance

and given to each other by the fates, a union blessed by the Goddess herself. Or so everyone believed.

I dragged a sleeve across my eyes to wipe the tears away and got on with my morning. It's like Dad said. Pride and Pack, first and always. Life carries on.

* * *

It had been a week since the coupling ceremony and so far, I'd managed to avoid Orion. He was needed at the council to deal with the human trespassers. I was training and patrolling with Cara day and night. At first, it was everything I could do to put him off, but the excuses wore thin pretty quickly. After a few days, Orion seemed to be avoiding me in turn, which stung more than I wanted to admit.

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It was almost like the sparkling adoration I saw in his eyes during the ritual wasn't real. Maybe he figured out somehow that I had hoodwinked him. Maybe he'd woken up, remembered it was Selena he loved and he'd realized that I was to blame for tearing him apart from his true mate.

Maybe I was to blame.

I firmly shook my head to clear those thoughts. This had to be Cersey's doing. At least I had my duties, and Cara, and the comfortable silence of loping through the forest in wolf form. Until I didn't.

The training field at Whittemore Gulch was filled with more people than usual. Something had happened. The tension was palpable. Jesse was more abrasive than usual, and suddenly it became clear why.

As soon as I saw Alpha Nathaniel, I ducked my head and tried to circumvent the main crowd so I could find Cara on the fringes. I could sense, by the heat in the air and the smell of rain and pine, that Orion was with him too. The knowledge set my body aflame and it yearned to pull in his direction. I ignored it with no small amount of difficulty.

"Diana!"

The sound of my name silenced my thoughts and the voices of those closest to me. It was Cara, and I could tell from the direction of her voice that she was standing right next to Alpha Nathaniel. I had no choice but to step forward.

I inclined my head to each of them, pointedly avoiding Orion's gaze as he stood beside his father.

Cara turned to Nathaniel. "Diana and I have been patrolling the borders, according to Jesse's schedules."

Nathaniel nodded at the information but addressed me. "Diana, what can you tell us about the human activity?"

I swallowed to ease my suddenly dry mouth. "They live in tents by the river. During the day, they remain at their campsite, but their scent trails throughout the forest. We suspect they leave at night. You will need to ask the night patrols what they have witnessed for a full picture."

"Noah has informed me that the night patrols have seen no activity from the humans. We need a different approach." Nathaniel paused, looking between Jesse, Cara, and his son. I did not know what secret message they shared. "We will watch them in twenty-four-hour shifts, so that we can better tail their activities. Cara and Jesse will be the first group. Diana and Orion will be the second group. Remember, you do not engage them unless you are attacked."

The assembled crowd erupted in a slew of whispers at the plan, but I couldn't hear them over the rushing sound in my ears. Alone with Orion? For twenty-four hours?

I jumped at a sudden hand on my arm, but it was just Cara, her gentle touch tethering me through the sudden rise in my panic. "Go and prepare. Jesse and I will rendezvous with you at the river spot this time tomorrow for the tradeoff."

"Why can't I go with you? Why does it have to be with..." I couldn't say the name.

Cara arched an eyebrow. She did well before in not mentioning the obvious thing, but

it seemed even she couldn't avoid it. "You know why. You are Orion's mate, which makes you the future luna. He wants you to be together, for the pack to see you together. To trust in your leadership."

Something above my shoulder caught Cara's attention and she stepped back.

I didn't need to turn to see. Fiery scents of wood and smoke and spice overwhelmed everything else. I couldn't do anything to stop Cara's retreat. Left with no other recourse, I slowly turned to face Orion.

His sheepish gaze was trained on the ground. Too ashamed to meet my gaze, no doubt. I couldn't blame him.

"Diana," he began, hesitating.

I said nothing, waiting for him to continue.

He took a deep breath. "My father assigned us together on the patrol."

It suddenly dawned on me that he was grasping, searching for a reason to talk to me. This was a way for him to come to terms with our forced partnership. I struggled to keep my voice even. "Yes, the alpha was quite clear in his instructions. Rest assured, I will prove a diligent partner on our patrols. Our..." I trailed off, reconsidering my words. I couldn't look him in the face. The desire to touch it, to stroke his cheek, was too much. My throat pricked, and my eyes grew hot. I fought to hold back the tears. "The events of the... Blue Flower Moon need not affect my duty." I turned to leave.

"Maybe we should talk about that," he said suddenly. "The coupling ceremony. We've barely spoken since."

My throat closed around my words, and I could easily imagine what he'd say next.

He would want to reject the fated bond in favor of Selena. Or maybe he knew... he knew I had been to see Cersey—

“There’s no need,” I said, glancing at him in earnest. The heat simmering between our bodies made my eyes water. It was too much, and I had to look away. “I know you care for my sister. I will not hold you back from your true desires.” Even if I desire you.

He reached out to me, but I knew that the moment he touched me, my resolve would be swept away by the breeze. I stepped away from him, dodging his grasp, and hurried home to prepare for our shift together.

ORION

“What are you doing here?”

I expected Selena’s question, but the lacerating tone disarmed me. In our time together, I never knew her to be anything but compassionate and empathetic. Sure, she could be selfish at times, but not at the expense of others. But her fire now crackled with white rage that threatened to lash out at any passersby. What was I doing here?

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I cleared my throat, attempting to rebuild the confidence she managed to shatter with her piercing question. “I wanted to talk.”

After Diana all but ran from me earlier today, I went on my own run through the forest to clear my head. I had shifted to wolf form, so I could forget about the drama. Mind-chatter quieted, my senses were alive with the forest, but it wasn’t distracting enough. My wolf operated largely on instinct, and even more than my human desire, my animal instinct longed to surrender to my lingering, subconscious desires. Being away from Diana made every muscle in my body—human and wolf—ache with unmet need. Every movement without her had my every instinct screaming in agony. I had wanted nothing except to track her down, to cement our relationship again. And again.

But I was standing in front of Selena. I wrested control of my racing thoughts and focused on the woman in front of me, who stood silent and staring—hip jutted out, arms crossed.

Her glare skewered me where I stood. “I didn’t realize we had anything to talk about.”

“The coupling ritual—”

She laughed. Loud, derisive. Mocking. Heat flared across my cheeks, but I said nothing. I had broken her heart. “The ceremony made things quite clear.”

“No, you don’t understand. You can’t unless you’ve bonded—”

“Excuse me?”

Nope, that was the wrong approach. I just rubbed salt in the wound. I tried backpedaling. “I just mean, it wasn’t what I wanted. I didn’t choose Diana, Selena. It just happened.”

She pursed her lips, and I could tell my words were like water to her, pouring through fingers without substance. “But you did choose.”

“Selena, when you’re in that moment—”

“That’s not what I meant. I didn’t want to go to the ceremony because I knew what could have happened. You knew what could have happened and yet you chose to go anyway. You chose to go through with it, despite knowing we could end up with other people or no one. As far as I’m concerned, you chose Diana because you were aware of the possibility and it didn’t stop you.”

“My father is our alpha, what did you expect me to do?”

Her hands fell, balling into fists at her side as her anger flared. “I wanted you to leave with me. I wanted you to choose me.”

Then, strangely enough, the flare of temper subsided. Her hands relaxed at her side, and the tense line of her shoulders drooped. Resignation.

“But you’ve made your choice, Orion. It’s time to live with it. You have your mate, so leave me alone. For good.”

My mouth fell open in habit like I wanted to argue with her. But there was no more argument left in her. Only dismissal.

“If that’s what you want.”

She frowned. “Clearly, it’s what we both want.”

When I walked away, I was surprised to discover that there was no quarrel remaining in me either. I felt empty, drained of this effort to hold onto something that had no form or substance.

* * *

Diana was already conferring with Clara and Jesse when I arrived at the rendezvous point. They acknowledged my presence with a few nods but Diana didn’t turn to look at me.

They had no new information to share about the humans, and I could see from the dark circles under their eyes that their watch had been diligent.

When Diana and I embarked on our patrol of the border, we remained in human form at her suggestion. Our wolves would have made tracking easier and traveling faster. But I already knew how our wolves would also make us more vulnerable to... our deepest impulses. Given her distance from me, I assumed that was why she’d insisted.

But why? I was baffled, and my heart withered further. I knew Diana would not want to make her sister feel worse about everything, so I had done my best to give her space since the ceremony. And yes, my father was right. I thought I loved Selena. But I was a boy, a child. No one can tell you what it means to be bonded until you experience the fated bonding yourself—that was what I now understood. And of all people—Selena, who questioned our traditions in the first place—she would not understand. I shouldn’t have tried. I’d made it worse. And I’d broken her heart. Did I really want her to understand? Or was I trying to assuage my own guilt for betraying

her? What's worse is that I'd somehow pushed Diana away in the process.

Why was my father always right? It was annoying.

The goddess was never wrong, and the fates had chosen Diana. And here she was, standing so close to me, and yet I was probably on the verge of losing her too. I was probably a womanizing pig in her eyes, flitting from one sister to the next, unable to grasp the concept of loyalty.

"Up ahead," she directed quietly, pointing through the trees. I blinked, looking at her for a moment, realizing how competent she was. I felt proud of her. She was worthy as a future luna. Now I needed to be worthy of my own path as a future alpha. I pushed all thoughts of sisters and mates aside to focus on the task at hand.

We found the tents easily enough. They were not mere camping tents for hikers or hunters. The tents were large, big enough to hold more equipment than a sleeping bag and crockery. And these humans reportedly stayed inside their tents during the day, but not at night, like they were some sort of nocturnal creatures. We remained crouched in the thicket across the clearing, hidden and far enough away to feel at ease.

"We'll have to shift tonight," I whispered to Diana. "Our wolves have much better night vision, plus we'll be able to pick up their scent better."

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She tensed next to me, the slightest muscle in her calf, the whitening of her knuckles against the tree trunk. But she brokered no argument, simply nodded.

The hours droned on, long and uncomfortable. We shared a canteen of water Diana brought. I was grateful for the occasional swallow that quenched my dry mouth.

By evening, the insects of the forest buzzed with life, and the slivers of sky through the trees were streaked with the glowing light of a dusty orange sunset. To the east, that sky filtered purple as small pinpricks of stars began waking up for the night.

Still, there was no movement from inside the tents. Diana and I exchanged a look, and I could tell she wondered about the same thing.

“Should one of us check to see if they’re still in their tents? Maybe they left when we met with Clara and Jesse,” she suggested.

I immediately straightened from my crouch. “I’ll go.”

Diana’s eyes grew wide before darting back to the human campsite. “You should go in wolf form, just in case.”

I shook my head. “I can’t risk it. If I run into one of them, I’ll just pretend I’m a hiker on the nature trail.”

Her frown made her look unconvinced, but since she didn’t argue the point any further, I took a step toward the camp.

A firm hand caught my wrist, igniting several sparks across my vision, swelling my tongue. I turned back to see Diana's wide eyes narrowed slightly in hard determination. "Be careful," she growled at me in a low voice.

The command, the sheer authority with which she spoke to me, thrilled me. The withered part of my chest soared, and I would do anything to see this side of her again. This concern over my well-being.

Not trusting myself with words, I swallowed one last time from her canteen and nodded.

The campsite was quiet, almost too quiet for human inhabits. Even in human form, my hearing was far superior to theirs. I crept closer and pressed my ear to the weather-proofed canvas, listening for any telltale signs of humans—whispered conversations, snoring, noisy eating. But there was nothing.

There were no screens to look through, no transparent part of the tent I could peer inside to determine what was within. I circled the perimeter of the tent, coming across its entrance but found it zippered up, secured with a small padlock on the zipper. For a moment, I considered slipping into my wolf to break it, but I continued further into the campsite to check for any signs of life.

A small fire pit remained at the camp's center, a clear meeting place. The pit was surrounded by makeshift seats—buckets and crates, some folding chairs. This wasn't out of the ordinary for human campsites. Human campers had a weird thing about roasting hotdogs and marshmallows.

But something about the fire pit was off. Nothing smoldered. The charred logs were cold to the touch. This campsite had been abandoned for some time, and we hadn't seen anyone leave or arrive. But the padlocked tent indicated they had something inside. Would they return for it?

I turned around to relay this information to Diana but suddenly found myself faced with an enormous, snarling werewolf I'd never seen before.

DIANA

I kept my eyes trained on Orion from the moment he ventured toward the human camp. I was so focused on him that I didn't notice the other wolf until it was practically too late. There was only the flitting shift of gray and black fur, and then I saw him silently racing toward Orion.

For a moment, I was stunned. I'd never encountered another werewolf that moved so silently, undetectable by my sharpened senses. At first, I assumed he was one of us.

But then I saw the flash of teeth, the shine of spittle dripping from his fangs. I realized, whoever this wolf was, he was vicious. I sprang into action. In a single smooth motion, with my first step, I shifted into my wolf, racing toward Orion.

My claws tore up the earth and grass as I hurtled myself across the clearing. When I reached Orion, my heart sank. He hadn't heard the intruder either, so he had no time to shift. Orion was sprawled in the middle of a nearby collapsed tent, large streaks of scarlet scored across his face and chest, blood pouring from his gaping wounds.

My vision went red. Growls ripped from my throat, vibrating through my entire body. I cleared the distance and slammed into the beast. From somewhere came a clipped yips as we tumbled through the trees.

Nettles and branches clawed at my skin, stinging with fresh scrapes. Before we rolled to a stop, I managed to leverage my weight and land on top. I leaned heavily onto my front paws, pressing them against his neck. He snapped in my direction, but I held him back, a growl rumbling through my throat.

I searched his mind, but could not hear his thoughts. I concentrated and thought clearly, Who are you?

Nothing. It's like there was no one home, but he was definitely a shifter. Did he not hear me? Or maybe he just could not understand me. He continued to jerk violently beneath me, trying to wriggle free.

I held him where he was. This wolf attacked Orion without provocation. He was on our land, but had not introduced himself to our council or Nathaniel. He could not be from any OA pack in the OA or he'd never ignore protocol that way. But there was something else unsettling about him, a bizarre scent that bristled my fur. It was unnatural, nothing of the earth or woods or animals. It smelled artificial, human-made, like the noxious stuff I'd smelled Selena procure from Half Moon Bay.

"Diana!"

I looked up at Orion's voice and saw him limping through the trees toward me. Why was he still in human form? Was he too injured to shift?

The brief distraction was enough for the intruder to slip out from under me. I caught my balance quickly enough, but he found some momentum and barreled into me. We rolled and tumbled again, and I struggled to comprehend his lightning speed. I felt his fangs nip at my throat, teeth just scraping through my fur. My long legs kept him far enough at bay to deal any real damage.

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We tossed through the undergrowth, coming to an abrupt halt when I crashed into a tree. The impact was enough to knock the breath out of me, but I scrambled to stand on my feet, to not give any moment of advantage to our assailant.

I recovered just in time to see him charging at me again, and I dove to the side so he could pass me and ram into the tree himself.

That stunned him, and he teetered for a moment, shaking his head violently back and forth to shake it off. I pounced. As we collided once again, I buried my teeth into the flesh of his haunch, and yanked back hard. The beast howled in pain.

He became frenzied. His body erupted in spasms as he recoiled against the wound. He managed to throw me off, but I paced in a semi-circle and watched him. There was a faint soreness in my ribs from hitting against the tree, my legs throbbed, and I knew Orion was still somewhere nearby, bleeding too heavily to shift.

The wolf's eyes glinted at me, as if considering his next move. He seemed more mad than intelligent, so I released another resounding growl, threatening far worse injuries if he continued this fight.

At that, he backed away a few paces, eyes trained on me. Eventually, he turned and bounded away, just as silent and fast as he had arrived. Part of me marveled at that unnatural speed. I'd never even seen Jesse, our greatest warrior, run that fast.

But I didn't linger to consider the outsider any more. I sniffed the air and locked on Orion's scent, pine and fresh rain with a hint of seawater, and raced to find him.

He hadn't moved far from my previous battleground, but he had braced himself against a tree. He was hunched over, clutching at his chest. His face was pale, and his breathing was labored. I trotted up to him, still as my wolf, and nudged him gently with my snout.

When he winced, I sprang into action. I lowered myself slightly, ducking beneath his arm and pushing him on my back. When I felt his hands weakly hold onto my fur, I took off in as much of an even pace as I could manage, careful not to jostle him further.

My heart was pounding, rising in my throat like it was trying to choke me. Orion needed shelter; he needed a healer. I felt his grip grow weaker with each step I took. He didn't have time and neither did I. He was injured because of me, because I let him go alone. How could I have been so stupid—

I couldn't panic. Orion needed me. Shelter first.

I made my way to a cave I knew sat at the base of the cliffs. The opening was narrow, but inside, it opened to a wide cavern. I kneeled low enough for Orion to slide off gently. He thudded to the ground and I instantly shifted to human form, crouching over him and rolling him onto his back.

The cuts on his face weren't as bad as I thought. Good. He was healing quickly. I took a deep breath and settled the nerves that were shaking my anxious fingers.

"Diana..." his raspy voice was barely a whisper. He asked, "Are you okay?"

AmIokay?

"Hey you." I indulged in a small smile. "I'm fine," I said, looking over Orion's chest wounds.

He moved, trying to sit up, but I firmly kept him down. “That wolf...” he started, swallowing. “Did he hurt you?”

My smile faltered, and my heart stuttered. I blinked to take him in again, fully this time. His eyes never left mine, and his brows knitted in worry.

“I...” My tongue was useless to answer him in light of this realization. He was barely able to speak, yet he was worried about me.

My inability to respond worked him up even more. He struggled against my hand, pushing himself up with surprising strength. He gripped my chin, and the touch flooded me with the heat of our closeness. But I couldn’t move or look away, transfixed as I was on him. He tilted my face to each side, looking me over. “Where are you hurt?” The raspy whisper was stronger now, low and severe. A dangerous threat dancing on the edge of fury. The muscles in my abdomen clenched at the beautiful sound.

I placed my hand over his. “I’m not hurt. A little sore, but I scared him away,” I reassured him, softening my voice to soothe those rough edges that flared in his eyes.

He needed to stare at my face a little longer before he could be convinced. I knew I’d won him over when he managed a stiff nod, and he settled back against the cave wall. He didn’t protest when I peeled what was left of his shirt off to get a better look at the injuries on his chest.

They were not healing as fast as I’d hoped, and my belly twisted as my hands fluttered uselessly above him. My canteen, all my supplies, including a few of Mom’s healing salves, were still in my bag at our stakeout spot.

I didn’t want to leave him alone, even for a minute, but we still needed that stuff.

I would run. I would be quick. I had to.

I leaned back on my heels. “I have to go get our bags,” I said with quiet calm. “It won’t take long. I’ll be back before you know it.”

Orion seemed to nod, but his eyes were now closed, which made it difficult to figure out if he could hear me. I reached out to caress his cheek for only a moment, a small reassurance mostly for my benefit. His face twisted, leaning into my touch.

ORION

It was difficult to concentrate on words and their meanings. And soon, there were no more words to understand. Only darkness surrounded me, and I seemed to float into it.

Images drifted before me, wolves snarling and baring teeth. One was a stranger, and the other was—

Diana. I shuddered at the name.

She stood before me, powerful and commanding. A line of defense against our enemy. When claws of fire raked across my skin like festering poison, she sprang into action without hesitation. My chest swelled at such devotion on my behalf.

There was a prickle of fear when she disappeared through the trees, that she had been cut like me. But once I saw her again, emerging with glistening black-brown fur, eyes sharp as a knife, I knew we were safe, and I had collapsed on her back as she carried us to safety.

The rest was fuzzy, shrouded in a haze of confusion as fatigue tugged at the edges of my vision. We were in a cave, and the only comfort I knew was her hand on my cheek. But when I opened my eyes again, there was only shivering darkness.

I twisted around to find her, but every movement was a lance of pain through my chest, echoing through the rest of my body. I had to go back to lying on my back, staring at the dim ceiling. I focused on that darkness, the damp ground beneath me, and tried to settle the fear clawing its way up my throat.

She wouldn't leave me alone; she would never be that cruel. She must be searching for help—

“Ah!” A neck muscle spasmed, jerking at the open slices of skin that burned my chest. The haze of confusion resolved in sharp relief as pain cut through every other sensation.

I clenched my jaw, biting the edge of my tongue, waiting for wave after wave of stabbing pain to subside. Only one balm could ease my suffering. Diana...

I'm coming.

The voice in my head was new yet perfectly familiar at the same time. The pain ebbed away in favor of her promise. I knew it was her, but how? The faint growling timbre of her wolf voice was something I'd only heard telepathically when I was my wolf. I'd never been able to hear wolves in my human form before.

In case it was real, and Diana was indeed speaking to me, I sent my own message back. Thank you.

Within minutes, I heard the soft padding of wolf steps, followed by the shift into a bipedal jog. When I blinked, Diana was hovering over me, and I swear she must have been glowing.

Her hand supported my neck as she brought something to my lips and commanded, "Drink."

I did, and a gentle stream of water soothed my parched mouth, chasing away the cracked dryness in my throat. When I had my fill, I heard the rustle of thick fabric as she dug through her bag.

"I'm not a healer," she admitted. "But these salves my mother made should help speed up the healing process and prevent infection. I'm sorry if this stings."

I was silent as she went to work pressing thick herbal salves to the gashes made by the unnatural stranger. Her fingers were soft, her touch gentle. Even though the salve was icy, I did not flinch from her fingers as they roved over the skin of my chest. When enough salve was applied, the cooling sensation diminished the piercing burns,

and I released a steady sigh of relief.

I sat up on my own, despite Diana's small protest. I'd been on my back long enough. I needed to show her I wasn't a weakling easily overwhelmed by one assailant. "You said you weren't a healer, but it feels like you did a good job. Already, the cuts feel better."

She looked down at her hands, suddenly busying herself with packing the leftover salve. "Mom, taught me a few things, but I'm afraid it does not compare to Selena's knowledge."

I frowned at the name, hating how I detested hearing it between us, hating how stiff and awkward things had become. "Your knowledge serves our pack in other ways. You are a great warrior."

Her mouth slightly fell slack. "You really think I'm a great warrior?" She sounded like she was in disbelief.

"Of course, I do," I said. "I would not say so otherwise."

Her mouth moved a few times, but no words escaped. She closed her mouth, thinking, and finally said, "It means a lot to hear you say that. I've always wanted to be the best for the pack."

I tilted my head, always intrigued by the gentle, selfless words she said. "For the pack?" I repeated.

She blushed, and I wondered why. She had said nothing wrong. "Yes, for the pack. My father is," she paused, eyes moist, "was a great leader in the guard. Mom serves as pack seer, just as your father is pack alpha. One day..." She hesitated. "Selena will follow in Mom's footsteps, just as you will with Nathaniel. I have no such assigned

role, so I work hard to be the best warrior I can be. Like Jesse. Well, maybe more like Cara.”

For some reason, this revelation continued to draw my rapt interest. “You’ve never wanted to leave?”

She snorted. “Leave? And go where? The compound is my home. No one outside our borders has any need of me, nor I them. My place is here.”

Her face turned somber, and she looked away. A small action, but one that ignited something in me. I did not want her to look away, to avoid my gaze in shame.

“I am sorry, I know I am nothing like Selena...”

I reached out to grab her face, firm yet gentle, forcing her to look at me. “Goddess, please. The fates chose you for my mate.”

Diana’s eyes flickered away as a blush painted her cheeks.

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I pulled her closer to me, until her eyes met mine again. “Selena struggles with her faith in our traditions. Do you?”

With my fingers on her chin, she managed to shake her head. “No, my convictions remain steadfast.”

“Then you should believe she made no mistake when she blessed our bond. I know things are... awkward, to say the least. Dating your sister was a mistake, I see that now. It only set her up for heartbreak. But that doesn’t mean I am not or cannot be devoted to you, tous.” I paused, releasing her, waiting to see if I had said the wrong thing.

She didn’t pull back, leaving our faces inches apart. Her eyes traveled the length of my face as she considered my words.

At that moment, I couldn’t breathe for fear of her rejection.

Then she closed that short gap between us, and her lips were on mine. Her fingers threaded through my hair, and I hungrily devoured her lips in return. She was a sweet breath of life, promise, redemption.

And in that moment, I realized a singular truth. I could never have made Selena happy. Because it was always Diana.

DIANA

When we finally broke away from the kiss, gasping for air, I was dizzy and

lightheaded as a new warmth flooded my senses and threatened to sweep me away. Orion wanted to commit to us.

He leaned in to kiss me again, but this time, I held him back with a hand.

His eyes darkened with a hint of confusion. “Do you not want to...” He left the question hanging.

My chuckle was silent, breathless. “Of course, I do. But you’re hurt. And we have to return to the compound and let them know what’s happened.”

“I’ll be careful,” he grinned, wagging his eyebrows. “They can wait a little longer.”

I returned his grin, leaned in for a kiss, and then pulled back quickly, sending a playful air punch to his gut. This was not how I’d planned to lose my virginity. “We have to get back,” I said firmly, smiling as Orion gave a pretend ooph!

There was nothing make-believe about his struggle to make it back, though. I positioned myself as his crutch, and we moved slowly, deliberately. We didn’t risk him shifting from his human form, knowing that could affect the healing process. After a while, when he could walk on his own, I led the way. Orion allowed me to take point without complaint, and it felt good to know that he trusted me.

As I guided our path, I relied mostly on my hearing and the faint waning moonlight filtering through the trees to see us through the forest. We were slower on foot, so it took a few hours for the familiar shapes of the compound’s buildings to come into view. A shrill whistle in the distance informed me that the nighttime guards saw our approach.

They met us as we reached the compound’s perimeter, and I was surprised to see that Jesse was with them. A sudden flashlight beam blinded me as he looked between us.

When he lowered it and I blinked away the white spots, the garish light cast angry shadows across his face. Or maybe he was just angry.

“Whatare you doing back here?” he all but growled. An undercurrent of energy rippled through his words, as if he would use his beta authority to send us back. “You’re supposed to be watching those humans.”

I pushed my shoulders back and straightened. Jesse might be battle-hardened and experienced as beta, but he had no right to speak to us, to speak to his alpha’s son in such a way. “We were attacked,” I hissed. “Orion was injured.”

Jesse’s face softened only slightly. He turned the flashlight to Orion again, to look him over closely. “What happened?”

I responded again. “Another wolf ambushed him, but not one I’d ever seen before. Not from our pack, and it was alone, so not with another pack either. It didn’t communicate and it smelled...” My nose wrinkled as I struggled to describe it.

“Smelled what?” Jesse prodded, relieving Orion of his inspection as he turned those hard, flinty eyes back to me.

“He didn’t smell natural. More like plastic trash and human chemicals. I’m not sure how to describe it.”

I wasn’t sure if my information helped, but Jesse nodded, taking it in stride. “We should alert the alpha.”

Together we headed to Orion’s house at the center of the compound, the Alpha House and the largest by a quick comparison. Lights flicked on inside, illuminating the first floor windows as some of the guards hurried ahead of us. One lingered, I could not see who, to help support Orion’s weight as he walked. Jesse soldiered on ahead with

a purposeful march that propelled him to reach the house faster than anyone else. I didn't bother catching up, remaining next to Orion so I could be sure he wasn't in pain.

The meeting room was large enough to fit most of Nathaniel's prominent warriors, but only three of the night guards and Jesse waited inside. Orion, the guard assisting him, and I stepped inside, followed a few moments later, by a bleary-eyed Cara still rubbing sleep from her eyes.

Inside your werewolf compound, there is an amulet that once belonged to me.

The witch's words clanged around in my head like a piercing echo. This was the first time I'd been in the Alpha House since meeting with Cersey. If there was an amulet stolen from her, it would be here. I turned my head around to look at the doors, wondering which of the rooms hid her amulet.

But I was no thief. Especially from our alpha.

When Nathaniel stepped through the door with Jesse's brother Noah in tow, he looked wide awake and freshly dressed. His eyes first went to Orion next to me, and he made a beeline to his son, checking him over and examining the now-dried salves I had applied.

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Orion, with more and more strength back, pushed his father away. “Dad, I’m fine,” he mumbled.

Nathaniel finally looked to his beta for answers. “What happened?”

Everyone’s voices were muted, recognizing the ungodly hour it was. Not Jesse though. He thundered without reserve, “What happened is that your son was attacked, and now wemustretaliate.”

Nathaniel looked back at Orion, then at me. “The humans did this?”

“No,” I said softly, casting an anxious glance in Jesse’s direction before continuing. “We didn’t see any humans in our recon. In fact, the campsite looked mostly abandoned. We were attacked by a wolf.”

“One of ours?”

I shook my head. “I don’t think he belonged to any pack.”

Cara tilted her head in curiosity. “How is that possible? All wolves in the OA belong to a pack.”

“He was alone,” I assured them.

“Maybe he was a scout.”

I frowned, thinking it was unlikely. “He didn’t communicate with us. It was like he

didn't understand us."

Cara pursed her lips in thought. "Perhaps he cannot understand us, if he's from outside the OA territories?" She was floating theories.

"Or maybe," Jesse snarled, still maintaining that anger. "He works with those trespassing humans. They encountered him at the human camp; that's the likely answer."

Nathaniel sighed slowly through his nose before he turned to Jesse. "And what do you suggest?"

"We should pay them back the same courtesy they afforded your son."

"Diana says the campsite looked abandoned. We have zero indication that those humans are responsible for this."

"Something must be done!" Jesse roared.

"The only certainty here is that an aggressive, unfamiliar wolf has invaded our forest. Do you recommend I send out the entire guard to track him down in the dark?" Nathaniel asked bitterly.

Jesse threw his hands in the air. "Yes!"

"We have no idea where this wolf is, or if his pack is nearby. "

"So we leave him be and let him continue attacking our people?" Jesse countered back.

Jesse's volatility frightened me. My back was pressed against the wall, and I felt

trapped, with nowhere to escape. Orion, apparently sensing my trepidation, placed a reassuring hand on my elbow, stroking my arm with his thumb. With that small contact a wave of relief and a sense of security washed over me.

Nathaniel considered Jesse's question in stewing silence. Something about the hard planes of his face made me more nervous than Jesse's shouting.

Eventually, the alpha decided with a note of finality that allowed no room for questioning. "We will search in the morning for this lone wolf. I will lead the efforts myself."

With the fight in Jesse somewhat extinguished, the room began to empty until there was only Orion, his father, and me. I looked at Orion, uneasy about leaving his side.

"Diana."

It was the alpha that addressed me. I reluctantly turned my gaze from Orion.

"I must speak with my son. Please, return in the morning to look after him while I'm gone."

I felt a sudden intake of breath at my side, like Orion was preparing to argue the point. I wasn't sure if it was because I was being dismissed or the thought that he needed to be watched over. Either way, I silenced the protest by touching his hand on my arm, casting a meaningful look to him before replying to Nathaniel, "Of course, My Alpha."

* * *

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I could have shifted, assuming my wolf self to run home. It would have been faster. But my side was still bruised and sore from my encounter with the strange wolf, and exhausted from carrying Orion home. So I walked upright, struggling to remember the last time I slept.

Images of the day teased at the back of my mind. Orion getting attacked, the bitter scent of the beast that attacked him, running through the forest for medicine. But all of it was nothing compared to Orion's words in the cave and the kiss that promised his affection. I touched my lip, tracing the shape, and smiled.

But a tiny wriggling sensation in the pit in my stomach persisted, threatening to steal my joy. It grew stronger the closer I got to home.

My bargain with the witch. Selena betrayed. Orion's faith. Orion's hot breath on my—

That was never a question. I knew I wanted Orion. And Orion wanted me. He loved me. That was real. Cersei or no Cersei, I was now certain of our bond.

My family home sat still and silent at the edge of the compound. As pack seer, for reasons I'd never been able to understand, Mom insisted that we live at the river's edge so she'd always have quick access to the rushing fresh water. It wasn't far, but now the seclusion of the place felt too small for me. Too far removed from everything else.

Before I reached the porch, I heard the creaking of the kitchen floorboards inside. I tensed, lingering by the porch steps and peering through the dark windows. If Mom was up, she would have turned on a light, lit a candle.

The front door swung open, and I crouched, ready to pounce on the intruder. Then a familiar scent came into focus—yarrow, and honey.

“Selena?”

Her figure stopped, and she froze in her tracks for a full heartbeat before slowly turning to face me. “You’re back early.” I could tell she was attempting a flat tone, but her voice was unsettled. Like she’d be caught.

I crossed my arms and scanned the darkness, taking in every detail. A large bag hung from a strap crossing her shoulder. “What are you doing?”

She crossed her arms as well, and her irritated tone resumed its normal timbre. “What does it look like?”

The bag was bulky, too big for her slight frame. “Are you running away?” The accusation gave way to a note of surprise.

She sniffed. “I’m not a kid, so it’s not running away.”

I ignored the technicality. “Where are you going?”

“I...” She cleared her throat and then arched on her toes, making herself taller, more confident. “I’m going to Berkeley.”

“Berkeley? Why?”

“The University of California, Berkeley, to be specific. It’s less than fifty miles from here. I’m going to study there. To live there. And to get a degree.”

I knew where Berkeley was. I’d even helped Selena research colleges during a few

clandestine visits to Half Moon Bay. I thought it was a lark. She was always digging at human books, following rabbit holes to things outside the elders' teachings. Mom knew about some of it. I thought she would lose interest with time.

I could hardly believe she was actually going to leave us. To leave me. "You're going to live with humans?"

She bristled like I'd insulted her. "Yes, I am. And I'm learning, maybe I'll learn something to help the pack. Maybe I will major in environmental science to help study and preserve the forest. Maybe I'll study medicine so someone here doesn't die like Dad again. The possibilities are endless."

I ignored the old argument about Dad. "So you're coming back?"

She looked away from me then, the porch railing claiming her interest. "Eventually, if I feel like it. College takes a few years. Maybe I'll find I like it more than here."

"You're abandoning your family," I said in shock.

The porch railing lost her interest once more as she turned steely, fiery eyes to me. "Abandoning? Hardly. I'm doing something for myself, and you too. Now you won't have to worry about me skulking about while you go off with Orion."

The barb disarmed me, and a flare of guilt knocked me back. "Is that what you want?"

She sighed, her shoulders deflating. She stepped off the porch to put her hand on my arm, almost the same way Orion had earlier—a gesture of comfort. "Look, Diana. I'm not stupid. Things aren't going to work out with me and Orion now, no matter what you or I do. You have your chance at happiness with him. And now, I'd like mine. Let everyone see how you're the good sister while I run off and do rebellious

things.” She chuckled, but it was forced, waiting for my reaction.

My mind whirled through the possibilities for the coming years without her. Fear clenched my heart at the prospect. “It’s not safe out there. You don’t have any human money. They use money for everything, you know. You even need human money to live somewhere. To eat! Where are you even going to live? How will you eat?”

Her hand rubbed soothing circles on my arm. “I do have some human money. I’m taking a bus, and I’m staying in campus housing. Everything has been arranged.”

My throat tightened as I realized how much planning this must have taken her. “What about Mom?”

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Selena looked away. “She knows.”

“And that’s why you’re leaving in the dead of night.” I pointed out.

“I left a letter.”

“What about me?” I tried to hide it, but there was a light crack in my voice.

She looked at me seriously then. “I left you a letter too. It’s on your bed.”

She’d thought of everything, and I was out of arguments. I could only stand and stare at her. I sniffed loudly, letting her see the tears streaming down my face.

She dropped her bag then and crushed me into a hug. I embraced her back, still unable to speak as she held me tightly. Still unable to speak as she released me and gave a parting wave. She didn’t say goodbye. And neither did I.

Some deep part of me understood. Sisters don’t say goodbye.

ORION

Sleep was light and restless. I had slept too much already, so I tossed through the remaining hours of darkness, taking extra care not to exacerbate the healing gashes on my chest. Eventually, the gray light of dawn streamed through my window. Dad knocked on my door frame and let himself in my room.

“How are you feeling?”

Sitting up on my own was easier now, so I turned around to face him, feet touching the floor. “Better than yesterday.”

Dad nodded and crossed the room to sit next to me. “And how is everything else? Besides your injuries?”

I arched an eyebrow at him. “Everything else?”

“Things with Diana seem much improved,” he noted, angling his head meaningfully.

I looked down at my hands. “Is this your way of gloating? To rub it in my face that you were right about the ceremony?”

His heavy hand settled on my shoulder. “I ask out of sincere interest, because I care about your happiness and well-being. An ill-fated mate is not a burden one lightly bears.”

I frowned at his superstitious concerns. “First you disapprove of Selena. Don’t start talking about curses now.”

He chuckled, “If anyone is cursed it’s the pack, settling in a place so near Half Moon Bay as we are, tempting the mettle of a witch.”

I knew he was serious. But, “A witch?” I asked.

He shrugged off my concerns. “It’s a long story. My point is that true, fated mates have always been considered rare miracles, but some have found trouble even when bonded at a coupling ceremony. Whether it’s a witch’s curse or just bad luck, who can say. But you are my son, you are the future of this pack.”

I didn’t understand. Only the worst betrayal could break a fated bond.

“Diana is your mate, and your future. When you become alpha, that means I will be gone and unable to advise you. Jesse is a hot-head, yes, but you are sensible enough to know not to rely on his wisdom for everything. That means building your own circle of people you trust. Diana should be the center of your circle, just as your mother was for me.”

I nodded at his words. “Diana is my mate. And we work well together, if yesterday proved anything.”

Dad chuckled again, “She saved your ass.”

I cracked a half-smile, but the thought was more serious to me than amusing. “She did. She’s more than proven herself to me. I just hope I can prove myself to her.”

The hand on my shoulder squeezed slightly before pulling me into a tight embrace. “You will, my son.”

He headed off then, leaving me alone in the house with nothing but my thoughts. I couldn’t go back to bed, so I listlessly roamed my way to the kitchen.

A light knock on the front door interrupted me. When I went to answer the door, I found Diana standing there, breathless, early morning mist clinging to her hair, her eyes a bit wild. I tensed, expecting bad news. But there was a timid smile tugging at the corners of her mouth, and her scent of cool peppermint was bright, not alarmed.

“You’re awake,” she greeted. A faint blush rose to her cheeks. I wondered if she ran here. “How are you feeling?”

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I stood aside to let her through, and I couldn't help the return smile floating to my lips. "I hardly feel a thing now," I said, allowing a casual amount of arrogance to seep through my tone.

She stepped inside and looked around the front room, her hands anxiously wringing together. I closed the front door, sealing us inside. Wafts of mint and brine hung heavily in her wake as she looked at everything, the furniture, the photos on the wall, everything but me.

"How are you feeling?" I asked when she didn't respond.

She whirled around to face me, realizing her distraction. "Oh, uh, I'm fine. The soreness has worn off. But... I couldn't sleep." Her eyelashes fluttered against her cheek as she looked away again.

I took a step toward her, but that suddenly felt like the wrong thing to do. Not because she backed away, but because the pressure in the room seemed to build. The nearer I stood to her, the thicker the air got. I wondered if it would suffocate me, but some insane part of my brain delighted in the thought of suffocating in a room of nothing but Diana.

I turned so she couldn't see me blush. "I couldn't sleep either." I coughed, hoping to clear my throat and clear my head of the sudden dizzying thoughts spinning through me as her scent bled through every thought. "What kept you up?"

"My sister," she said slowly.

Selena was the last person I wanted to think of, but I couldn't deny she was my mate's sister. Given my last interaction with Selena, it would come as no surprise if she gave Diana more grief—

“Selena is gone,” Diana said. Her voice was muted, almost hollow-sounding, filtered through distance. But it rang through my head, echoing as I absorbed its meaning.

“Gone? Where?”

“She decided to leave and study at a university.”

Diana said nothing else, biting her lower lip as she watched me expectantly.

She'd actually done it? She'd modified her prior plan for us to run away together, and she'd gone through with it. Alone. It was unwise, so part of me was worried about her. Another part of me wasn't surprised. She was smart and resourceful. If anyone could leave the compound and learn to live a new life outside the pack, it was Selena.

Truth be told, I was relieved.

Diana had a look of relief on her face too. However bitter Selena might have been, she'd made a choice to move on. I felt a weight that I hadn't even realized I was carrying suddenly lift and float away.

Freedom.

I watched the smile spread on Diana's face, and the world felt brand new. We grinned at each other. The air between us filled with an exciting tension, and in a single moment I narrowed the space between us. My hands cupped Diana's face as our lips made contact. Her fingers traveled to my neck, scrabbling with the hair at my nape. The healing skin on my chest and face protested, but it was a sweet burn.

A rumbling growl escaped my throat against my will. Our frenzied movements paused at the sound, and we both pulled back long enough to catch our breath and chuckle. At last, we were here. We were free.

I dipped my face into the crook of her neck, inhaling sweet notes of honey and wildflower. Her long hair was like a soft curtain that tickled my nose. There was so much of Diana I hadn't yet explored, so much time wasted after our coupling ceremony. I was impatient, but I also wanted to savor every drip of her.

"Come with me," I murmured against her skin, delighting in how she shivered at my breath on her neck. I pulled away slightly, reaching for her hands and leading her to my bedroom. We quickly covered the distance, and I shut the door to affirm our privacy.

"We don't have to rush things," I said.

"I'm ready, Orion. I want this." Her tone was eager, breathless.

She lowered herself onto the mattress without breaking eye contact with me. Transfixed, I watched as she shrugged off the light jacket, revealing the tank top beneath. I went to her, but she fended me off with a hand on my chest and a provocative smirk. I stayed where I was, watching her hands with hungry eyes. With a single, deft motion, the tank top was pulled over her head and discarded to the floor with her jacket. In even less time, her bra snapped loose and fell from her shoulders.

She flushed deliciously under my heated gaze, which only made me hotter. And harder. I crawled onto the bed and straddled her hips, pinning her hands beside her face. I kissed her, soft and deep, her tongue gliding against mine, meeting my every movement.

I explored the length of her torso, then I slowly made my way down her body,

pressing my face to the center of her belly. She was exquisite, every dip and curve a new pleasure. She squirmed beneath me, and I moved up again, fondling each perfect breast with my tongue, nipping each peaked nipple in turn. Diana arched her back in response, and I nuzzled against the swell in her breast.

I leaned back, taking her in; her alluring, half-lidded gaze watching me. She was mine, and I was hers. The certainty of it set every nerve in my body aflame.

Diana ran her fingers gently down my chest, around my waist, and tugged at the waistband of my pajama bottoms. The thin barrier of flannel hardly concealed my hunger. I stood and quickly got rid of them as I watched her shimmy out of her pants and panties, both of them falling to the floor in a heap. Then we were both naked, stripped bare before each other. I had never wanted anything as much as I wanted her. The taste of her, the feel of her...it was so familiar, so utterly right. I lowered myself to kiss her navel, a low, severe oath leaving my lips, "I would be yours, Diana, for the rest of time, if you would have me."

Her breath hitched, and her hips lifted off the bed. Her answer was a sharp hiss. "Yes."

Diana opened her legs, willing and eager. I dove lower still, to that sacred part at the apex of her legs, feasting on everything she offered with determined strokes of my tongue. She tasted as she smelled, sweet and cold and sharp, like honey and mint and ocean.

Her fingernails scraped at my scalp, her knees tightened around my head, but they only urged me all the more, sucking on her sweetness as her pulse thrummed against my mouth. A moan slipped from her lips. I pressed a finger inside, continuing my rhythmic feast, then two, and I felt her symphony peak. Her body shuddered as she called out to me.

“Orion.”

The sound of her panting my name was nearly my undoing. I pulled my head back, and she reached for my face. We rolled together, and in one smooth movement, she flipped her position and straddled me on all fours. I held her gaze, snaking my hand down between her thighs, and guided the tip of my throbbing cock to her sacred entrance. I watched and waited for her to stop me.

She did the opposite. “I want you,” she rasped in my ear, her voice breathless, “I need you inside me.” Our patience failed at the same time. I lifted my torso and she rocked herself back, plunging herself around my erection. She gasped sharply as a growl escaped me, loud and wild, and we held there, suspended, conjoined in every way in that single moment. My fingers turned white with the grip they had on her hips. Diana reached for me and was not satisfied until her arms were wrapped around my neck, her face buried in my shoulder. I held her poised in my lap, and the small whimpers escaping her rendered the moment to my command.

I lifted her slightly, slowly, and eased her back onto me, deeper, sinking and—Goddess. Diana was pure bliss.

I lifted her again, and she sank with more intention. More speed, more weight.

She bounced up, and I pulled her back down. We continued, panting, aiming at an inevitable crescendo, increasing our rhythm. The heat was delicious, and the friction had my mind soaring beyond this bedroom. I could see the moon and the stars in the bright spots that flooded my vision. With Diana’s every rise and fall, I felt like I would rocket to the heavens were she not tethering me to the earth.

The rising, the sinking, it all did not stop until I cried out her name with a moan that I feared might shudder the entire forest. Diana.

I fell back, with her on top of me this time, gasping and panting in the shockwaves of our pleasure. She clung to my neck with a vice grip, and I would have it no other way but tangled with each other in the sheets.

When we'd caught our breath, we floated together in gentle silence.

And I heard a delicate whisper from my beautiful mate beside me, "I love you."

I savored her words. And in the perfect wholeness of that moment, sleep found us. First, Diana, and then me, lulled as I was by her gentle breathing.

I wasn't sure how long we remained that way. The sky outside my window was bright yellow and well into the day when I awoke. An impatient, inconsolable knocking shattered our reprieve. Diana stirred, blinking, and I slipped off the bed and quickly threw on some clothes.

When I answered the door, Jesse stood there with a small group gathered behind him. His face was stormier than usual. "What is it?" I asked.

"We were attacked," he said in a rush. "Your father's gone missing."

DIANA

When Orion told me what had happened, I quickly got dressed and followed him outside. News of the attack on Nathaniel spread like wildfire, and soon, the compound was in chaos. Jesse did little to settle everyone's fears, barking at anyone in his path to get out of the way. Cara joined us, along with Noah, and we gathered with a few others from the guard just outside the compound's perimeter.

With us all gathered, Jesse rounded on us, keen to bark more orders.

But Orion was ready, speaking first. “What do you mean my father is missing? What happened?”

Jesse’s fingers flexed, ready to form a fist. His jaw clenched, but he nodded toward his brother. “Noah was there. Tell them.”

Noah’s mane of shaggy curls bounced around his face as he looked to the ground, a stark contrast to the sharp edges of the shaved sides of Jesse’s long, straight hair. “We went to the human camp to investigate. I followed Diana’s trail to see if I could track the other wolf. Nathaniel stayed behind. Then I heard howling, like there was a fight. When I returned, Nathaniel was gone. There was no trail, no communication from him. He just vanished.”

Orion turned to Jesse again. “And where were you when this happened?”

Jesse rolled his eyes and shifted impatiently. “Nathaniel split us up to canvas more ground. We need to look for him now.”

Orion frowned, and I sensed his temper charging the air between us. Everyone else seemed oblivious to it, especially when he continued in a calm voice. “Yes, we do.”

Eight of us went into the forest—Jesse, Cara, Noah, Daniel, Eli, Violet, Orion, and me. We paired off again, but this time with the intent of staying close. And this time, we shifted into our wolves.

Jesse led the charge first, with his brother, followed by Daniel and Eli. Cara took after them with Violet, and I hung back with Orion for a moment. He stared off into the distance, hands behind his head and his brow furrowed.

I cautiously approached him, something inside me twisting with concern. “We’ll find him.” I reached out to touch his arm, but it stiffened beneath my fingers.

“We better,” he said gruffly. He slipped out from beneath my hand, and in a single, fluid motion, transformed into his midnight black wolf. I followed suit, and we chased after the others.

The human campsite was much the same as the last time I’d seen it, except one tent remained crumpled—the one Orion had unceremoniously crashed into when he was attacked. The others were still the same, untouched.

Jesse was already pacing irritably. Cara’s sandy wolf had her nose to the ground in search of a trail, but apparently, there was none to find. There was, however, a peculiar acrid smell hanging in the air, masking all other smells in the forest. If I focused on it too much, it hurt my head and made me sick to my stomach.

What is that stench? Violet’s voice echoed in my mind, and I could tell she was nearby, perhaps behind another tent.

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Ammonia. Even telepathically, Jesse's temper was audible in our heads. Noah, was this smell here before?

Maybe a little, but nothing like this.

It's these damn humans! A nasty snarl ripped through the camp to accompany Jesse's internal bellowing. We need to hunt them down—

Do you really think humans would be able to overpower my father? Your alpha?

No one responded to Orion's question.

We should use the foul smell, Cara decided. If it's masking the scent of Nathaniel, then it could lead us to him.

It was a good plan, except we quickly discovered that the smell seemed to permeate the forest for miles in a wide, encompassing radius, so we split up into two different groups, one fanning out west, the other east. Noah and Jesse went with Orion and me.

I stayed close to Orion's side, but he didn't seem to notice me. I tried not to dwell on it and concentrated on the direction of the nasty odor. As overpowering as it was, I could still feel the lingering heat of Orion's body over mine, the pulse of him inside of me.

Get a grip, Diana, I growled to myself. Now isn't the time.

Soon, we came across a river, and we were no closer to finding the source of the

smell or Nathaniel. Jesse looked upstream and downstream, trying to determine the best course of action.

Orion loped up beside him. We shouldn't split up, he reminded him.

Jesse didn't answer immediately. We need to cover as much ground as possible in the shortest amount of time.

Getting separated is what got me attacked. It's why my dad is missing. We have to stay together.

If we split up, Noah volunteered. We could just separate long enough to see where the stench is the strongest.

Just a few miles, I offered. Close enough to turn back if we hear trouble.

Orion deliberated before growling a resigned, Fine.

Noah and Jesse headed upstream, while Orion and I took downstream. Our pace was brisk, but I was not too winded to notice the bristling of Orion's black fur. I wanted to smooth it down, to take away his worries and stress.

What are you thinking? I tried gently before immediately cringing. It was a stupid question; I knew what was on his mind, but I wasn't sure how to get him to open up.

A moment passed, and he didn't answer. I thought he might not have heard me, or worse, ignored my question. But eventually, he divulged, We've never faced something like this before. We don't know our enemy or why they would do this.

The pack is strong, I said by way of comfort. Nathaniel is strong too. We will get through this.

Orion huffed, displeased with my attempt to placate him. This isn't a territory dispute with a neighboring pack, Diana. How can we face an enemy we do not know? One we have not seen. Why would they kidnap him? Were they trying to kidnap me before?

I didn't have any comforting words for him, but the prospect of someone taking Orion away, kidnapping him for some nefarious purpose... The thought alone made my chest cave and my tongue taste like metallic bile.

Orion stopped suddenly, and I maneuvered just in time to avoid colliding with him. Do you see that?

I realized this part of the river looked too familiar, and despite the warm sun overhead, I shivered. There was no denying that the odor was even stronger here, at the small bridge connecting to the small wooded eyot in the middle of the river. Cersey's cottage.

My heart leaped to my throat. I had not made payment to the witch. Did this have something to do with—

I couldn't bear the thought. But the smell. Did it mean that Cersey was responsible for taking Nathaniel? Did she have something to do with the human campsite? If I had collected her amulet before now, would this be happening?

I tried to calm my racing thoughts. No. It made no sense that Cersey would be at the center of all this. I glanced sideways at Orion. We should leave.

Why? What is this place?

My heart thundered, drowning out every sound in the forest. What if Orion had discovered that I went to Cersey before the Blue Flower Moon? What if he thought I

made a bargain with her to make him my mate with some twisted magic...

Or worse yet, what if the only reason he was my mate was because Cersey made it so? That Selena taking off for college was a convenient arrangement engineered by the witch? To what end? Give me a single night of bliss only to rip it all away?

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Diana? What's wrong?

I blinked, realizing Orion had moved in front of me. He was watching me with concern. I tried to control my breathing, slow my heart rate as I scrambled for an answer.

I am fine. But this is Cersey's cottage. The witch of Half Moon Bay. She's dangerous.

Orion turned back to look at the unassuming cottage covered in lichen and ivy. The windows appeared dark, like it was currently unoccupied. No one was home. His nostrils flared. What if she did something to Dad?

I didn't have the knowledge or expertise to confront witches or magic of any kind. Not like... Selena. My heart sank at the thought. Selena was who Orion needed now.

I hardened my gaze and stood my ground. If she is the one who took him, we shouldn't face her alone. We should get the others first.

Thankfully, Orion heeded this logic, and we turned to follow the river upstream. Jesse and Noah were on their way to meet up with us as well, confirming the scent was weaker upstream.

I think we found the source, Orion told him. The scent was strongest at this cottage.

Jesse's lips curled over the top row of his teeth, emitting a growl that sent chills up my spine. A cottage in the middle of the river? Covered in ivy?

Orion grunted in affirmation.

That damned, good-for-nothing witch.

You know the witch? Orion asked.

I had a run-in with her a few years ago. She's a jealous, vain, cruel harpy. She would hex our pack with a half-moon curse if she could, but your father and I took care of that. If the witch was involved, she probably kidnapped your father for revenge.

I dared not breathe, but I couldn't help myself from asking, How?

Jesse's brown wolf gave a satisfied snort. We stole the source of her magic. Her amulet.

I managed to choke out a second question. Where is it?

Before Jesse could answer, a clear alto voice, far too familiar for comfort, rang out from the other side of the river. "Come now, don't keep us in suspense."

ORION

We all turned to see a tall, lithe woman step from the trees. Her blue linen dress was rather plain and unadorned, considering her strange elegance. Jesse and Diana tensed on either side of me, and while some deep part of me wanted to do the same, I didn't have the luxury of showing weakness. I was the son of the pack alpha, acting alpha now that he was missing.

She looked at us with piercing blue eyes that felt like frost before pursing her lips into a slight frown. "Why don't we shift into a form we can all understand?"

Jesse growled at the suggestion from my right side, but I was already moving, taking a smooth step with my human foot.

She gave a wide grin that showed her teeth, like she innately understood the language of predators. “That’s better now. And you are... Ryan? Is that right?”

“My name is Orion,” I said firmly. “Who are you?” Despite the question, I thought I knew the answer already.

“Your friends haven’t told you about me?” Another purse of her lips, feigning offense. “I am hurt. I remember their names well. Jesse, Noah, and...Diana.”

Her voice purred over my mate’s name in a way that made me shiver. I wanted to stand in front of Diana, to shield her from this obviously dangerous witch.

“But no matter, Orion,” she continued. “My name is Cersey.”

I was tired of hearing her voice already. The way she cooed, she clearly enjoyed the way her voice sounded. “Did you take my father?”

“Your father?” she tilted her head.

Jesse, practically vibrating with rage at this point, snapped his teeth together before shifting into human form. “Enough with your lies. Tell us what you know!” he shouted at her.

She grinned again at our beta, and something dark and dangerous flashed through her eyes, like she was the wolf and Jesse was her prey.

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“The one you’re looking for... is Nathaniel, isn’t it? Poor old Nate. I’ve done nothing to him.”

“You lying bitch,” Jesse spat. His shoulders quivered. I wouldn’t blame him for shifting back into his wolf to charge her on the spot.

She arched an eyebrow, completely unphased by the foaming man before her. “Careful, my dear Jesse. That loose tongue of yours always has a way of getting you into trouble. But if you think I’m lying, by all means, cross the river and claw the truth from me.”

Her words and her tone were so sweet; the threat behind them shimmered like a tinkling melody. Even Jesse had enough sense not to respond further to her baiting. His eyes instead considered the river before us, and I wondered if the witch had cast some sort of spell on it to defend herself against us.

But if Jesse and my father really stole the source of her power, she wouldn’t be able to do such a thing... would she?

“Tell us what you know, please,” I said carefully.

She lowered her chin. “What a sweet boy you are. I’ve done nothing to your dear feather, but I might know where he is and what happened to him. I might share this information with you.”

I waited for the condition, but her silence forced me to inquire about it.

“Name your price.”

She chuckled. “I would never want to make enemies of the KUA pack, so I only ask that we put past differences aside.” Her eyes flickered to Jesse. “Restore what was stolen from me, and I will happily assist in your search for Nathaniel.”

I understood. “Your amulet.”

Jesse yelled out in frustration. “Tell us why we shouldn’t eviscerate you where you stand.”

Cersey rolled her eyes, inspecting her fingernails. “Don’t you want to be friends? I’m sure it’s preferable to having a witch as your enemy.”

Her eyes flashed my way and my blood ran cold.

“You’re a smart boy, Orion, like your father. He understood the value of making friends.”

How could she speak of my father with such familiarity? Jesse said he’d helped him steal the amulet. That didn’t make it sound like they were on any sort of friendly terms.

“Lies are the witch’s only language,” Jesse muttered to me quietly. I nodded at his words. They were the only explanation.

“How do we know we can trust you? If you know where my father is, then all signs suggest you had a hand in his kidnapping.”

She laughed again. “Knowledge does not equal complicity. Your pack has my amulet, rendering me powerless to help in my current state. But if you want proof...”

The witch lifted a lazy finger, slowly, deliberately, to my left side.

“Your mate has already enjoyed the benefits of my friendship. I’ve no doubt she will offer a glowing testimony on my behalf.”

Just as slowly as Cersey lifted her finger, I turned to look at Diana, searching for some confirmation these were more lies from the witch. But Diana’s face told of a different story. Her wide eyes trained on the witch, and her lower lip quivered, slightly agape.

“What is she saying, Diana?” I asked in a low voice.

Diana turned her eyes to me. What was going on? Then I remembered her reaction when we came upon the cottage. She did know this witch, this Cersey. I reached for Diana’s hands, holding them in my own for comfort and warmth. They remained limp and cold.

“You can tell me,” I whispered to her in earnest. “Has she hurt you? Threatened you in some way?”

“Hurt her? Threaten her?” Cersey cackled from across the river, somehow hearing the words I only spoke to Diana. “I would never treat a friend in such a manner. If anything, I’ve helped Diana break the pack’s little curse.”

Jesse roared to life once more, shouting loud enough that his words echoed through the trees, sending birds from their rest. “If the pack is cursed, then it’s all because of you.”

I dropped Diana’s hands and turned around in time to catch Cersey lose her amusement entirely. Her smirk fell away, leaving behind a mask of stone with eyes like a brewing tempest on the sea. Her voice was deadly quiet but audible to us all the

same. “Do not perpetuate such falsehoods. The curse originated with you, my dear Jesse. You broke a promise, and you stole from me because you are a coward.”

“I am no coward,” Jesse yelled back.

“Then, by all means, cross this river and eviscerate me all you wish, my dear.”

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I turned, expecting to stop Jesse—braggart, brutish Jesse—from making a grave mistake. But he did not rise to the challenge. He stared at the witch, enraged, lips pulled back over his teeth, but he did not move.

Cersey sighed, as if disappointed. “I grow bored of this conversation. You know where I live. Deliver my amulet, and I will help restore what you have lost in return. Make your decision quickly, little wolf. I suspect your father has little time to spare.”

She waved her hand through the air, and a sudden burst of wind kicked up, rustling through the trees, and kicking up loose leaves. Then she stepped back and melted into the shadows of the forest.

DIANA

Orion didn’t look at me once as we traveled back to the human campsite. He and Jesse murmured in low voices not meant for my ears, no matter how hard I might strain to catch their conversation. Noah likewise didn’t glance in my direction, perhaps too preoccupied with his own thoughts to notice me. Or maybe he thought I was an enemy now, someone who fraternized with a witch who had cursed the pack.

Did I curse the pack?

A ghostly image of a Third Quarter Moon floated in the potion I drank, after all.

Jesse said the pack was cursed.

Cersey said I was helping to remove the curse.

What did any of it mean?

“Whatever we do, time is of the essence,” Orion sighed from a few paces ahead. “I’m not inclined to believe anything the witch says, but she was right about that. The longer it takes to get Dad back...”

His voice pitched to a dry crack, and he fell silent again. His pain reminded me of my own when my father passed. I wanted to help, to ease his anxiety, to soothe every worry. Instinctively, I quickened my pace to catch up to their loping strides.

Orion cleared his throat. “If we don’t return her amulet, how do we find him?”

“We need a tracker,” Jesse said. “Or a scrying spell.”

I finally reached them. “There’s—”

My voice went unheard as an idea sparked for Orion. “Or a tracking spell! Selena could—”

He looked at me and stopped dead, while my mouth hung open mid-sentence, processing Orion’s words. His first instinct was to consult Selena. But my sister had left.

I closed my mouth and slowed my steps, bracing myself as sharp little shreds of agony peppered my chest. My sister wasn’t here, and yet she was his first choice. And why not? She had magic; she would have been capable of helping him.

Selena, who was beautiful and smart and perfect. How could he not want her in his time of need?

Orion slowed down with me, ignoring Jesse’s protests. “Diana, I didn’t mean—”

I shook my head and feigned a smile for his benefit. “I understand. I was going to say, there’s always my mother. She could help.”

Orion continued staring at me, but I felt close to crumpling under his gaze. I hurried past him to reach Cara and Violet, who had returned already. Cara noticed our forlorn expressions. “What did you find?”

Orion and Jesse filled her in, and I set to work helping Violet and Noah investigate the human tents left behind. Staying in our human forms, we managed to cut the locks, unzip the flaps, and peer inside.

There was no trace of sleeping bags or air mattresses, no food or drink coolers, or any other signs of habitation. There were only stacks of metal boxes and lockers, secured with more padlocks. Noah stepped forward, tall and lanky with taut muscles bulging in his arms. He took the first box from me and angled it against the ground. With a well-placed kick, he managed to destroy the lock. He handed the box back to me with a half-smile.

“Thanks,” I said, opening the box to rifle through its contents.

Still no food, water, or other camping supplies. The box was filled to the brim with paper. I thumbed through the stacks, making out individual files. I chose one at random and opened it. A sterile logo emblazoned the front of the folder: CRISPR Therapeutics. The name meant nothing to me, so I continued going through the box.

The papers within were all human business, science and technology from the looks of it. But it was all gibberish to my eyes. Once again, Selena would know what this was about. But there was one part, the mention of wolves—

“This fell out,” Violet said, bending to pick up a picture. We examined the glossy

photo of a grainy image of a wolf. Not a werewolf, the forest animal. Violet and I shared a look of trepidation.

Noah sighed in frustration as he flipped through the second box he opened. “I don’t understand any of this. Do we know anyone who might?”

Selena, of course. But she wasn’t here now. I kept my mouth shut.

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Violet shook her head. “We should take one of these boxes back to the compound. We can study it more there.”

Noah nodded at her suggestion, heaving a box on his shoulder and carrying it outside.

Violet smirked and glanced back at me. “He’s much different from his brother.”

I mustered a smile back. “Night and day difference.” Just like me and Selena, I thought to myself.

“If you had to work with one on a patrol or something, which one would you pick?”

The answer was easy. “Noah, he’s much quieter.”

Violet shrugged. “He’s sweet, but you can’t deny that Jesse...”

She trailed off, her tone curling around the beta’s name with reverence. I arched an eyebrow at her unfinished speculation.

Violet suddenly blushed. “Never mind.”

I chuckled to myself and ducked through the tent flap.

We made a plan. Jesse would return to Alpha House to guard Cersey’s amulet, while Orion would visit Terra for a tracking spell.

“You’ll need something that belongs to him,” I pointed out, relieved I could at least

be of some use.

Orion only nodded.

Cara would debrief the other pack protectors on the situation. And so, we made our way back to the compound, this time as our human selves so Noah could carry the metal box of human files. I shadowed just behind Orion in case he needed me.

Jesse saw it as an opportunity to broach a sensitive subject. “We should talk about what happens, in case we aren’t successful.”

I held my breath at the beta’s audacity, catching his meaning immediately.

Orion was a little slower on the uptake. “What do you mean?”

Jesse remained dauntless. “If we can’t find your father. Or if we can, but it’s too late.”

Orion rounded on him, stopping suddenly. Our group also stopped, turning to watch the exchange. I felt my shoulders tense in response to Orion’s flare of anger, and I surreptitiously crouched, edging my way next to him, ready to defend against anything Jesse might hurl in his direction.

Jesse, miraculously sensing some boundary he overstepped, backed two steps away, his hands held up. “I am not saying it’s going to happen. We should just be prepared.”

Orion’s eyebrow was a flat line as he scowled. “And how do you recommend doing that?”

“You’re the next alpha after Nathaniel. You’ve known this your entire life. The reality may just happen sooner than you expected.”

I held my breath, waiting for Orion's response. But he just stared at the beta for several long minutes. Then, without a word, he turned back around and marched off without slowing, ending the discussion.

Jesse frowned and started calling out to him. "Don't walk away—"

"He understands," I hissed.

Jesse blinked, startled at my outburst. But his face quickly hardened. "He needs to do more than understand."

I sniffed. "Stop worrying. He will do the right thing. Maybe you should worry about guarding that amulet."

To my surprise, Jesse didn't say anything back. Moments later, his shoulder bumped into mine as he shoved past me.

As we neared the compound, we split up to complete our respective roles, and I headed for my house to alert Mom that her services were needed. That morning, she had been moping about Selena's leaving. When I told her we needed a tracking spell, she came to life, bustling around the kitchen as she prepared the materials. I sat at the table and watched her retrieve her scrying mirror, a large oval piece of glass with a silver frame, lightly tarnished at the edges from its age. Next to it, she smoothed down a map of the area that included major points of interest in Northern California.

She also placed candles at each corner of the table to represent the four cardinal directions. Then, she set a red palm stone, a bulbous nodule of iron oxide at the north end. When Orion arrived, she was ready, her face smeared with lines of charcoal to grant her divination insight.

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As he entered the house, Orion briefly glanced in my direction before looking away. Our recent distance worried me, especially after our intimate morning together. Did he find me untrustworthy because of Cersey's comments? Or was it something else?

I recalled that morning, lying in his bed, how those words escaped my lips without my bidding. Small yethonest words.I love you.

I realized with a sudden surge of ice through my veins: he never said it back.

“Do you have an item of Nathaniel's?” my mother asked him.

Orion pulled something from his pocket. It was a small wooden carving of three wolves, a symbol of the KUA pack and the name our ancestors took thousands of moons ago, Kaphan Unix Achcho, which roughly translated meant Three Wolves Friend.

My mother accepted the token,placed it on the iron oxide, and gestured for Orion to take a seat. He did so in the chair across from me. Still avoiding my gaze.

Mom sat at the head of the table after turning off the lights, leaving the flickering candlelight as the only illumination in our dining room.

She began chanting in her rhythmic, grave voice:

“Goddess of Night, remove the shroud

that blinds our eyes.

Goddess of Light, cast your beam

to show us truesight.

Goddess of Truth, lift the veil

that keeps the falsehoods real.

Goddess of Earth, tether our spirit

so we may not wander from the fold.

O Glorious Goddess,

grant us the mercy we beseech

in this hour of our dark need.”

I watched as an image shimmered to life in the mirror, starting at the center before spreading to the edges. All of us craned over the mirror to watch.

Alpha Nathaniel was lying down with his eyes closed, as if he was sleeping peacefully. No bruises or other injuries seemed to mar his appearance. But as the image widened to offer more details, we saw his place of rest was not a bed or a forest floor—it was a sleek, silver platform surrounded by wires and tubes. He wore a strange sheet, or something like it.

I kept my mouth shut as we wondered at what we were seeing. We could see no one else, and the cold, unfeeling nature of the place sent a chilly gust through the room, making the candles blink, and me shiver.

“Where is that?” Orion hissed in frustration.

Just then, Nathaniel’s three wolf carving rolled off the piece of iron oxide and found its way to the map my mother had spread out on the table. It rolled purposefully along the coastline before coming to a stop.

Mom stood quickly, slapped her hand on the map and began tracing the perimeter around the statue. When she picked up the wooden carving, the center of the drawn circle was right here—Half Moon Bay.

ORION

I clutched the map Terra gave me with its circle around Half Moon Bay. It was a wide area to search for my father, especially since it was a human town, and we would have to remain in human form to avoid arousing suspicion.

No one liked the idea of being in Half Moon Bay, even if it was after dark. Sometimes I ventured into town, but mostly the pack relied on a couple, Hannah and Levi, who would regularly venture to the human town beyond the compound to trade for supplies we might need.

Hannah and Levi came with us and acted as our guides, but we needed a bigger search party. The couple knew the town best and could lead us to where we might find my father. Jesse insisted that he come too since he knew Cersey best and he was convinced that the witch was involved. Noah joined because of Jesse. Cara and Violet stayed behind to watch the compound in my absence.

Something in me hoped Diana would also stay behind. It was safer for her in the compound than around humans. So many things could go wrong, especially if we had to avoid shifting. We would be powerless, I would be powerless. I was a mess anyway—I was not handling my interim alpha duties well. I was terrified for Dad and

I couldn't think straight.

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I sensed her presence approaching just before we left. The scents of peppermint and pine were a soothing balm to my frayed nerves, and I inhaled deeply before turning to her. But there was something unsettling about her expression, she seemed guarded. I wondered if she sensed my weakness, how close I was to coming apart at the seams. Some future alpha I was. Her piercing eyes must have seen it, how the fear threatened to claw its way out of my throat.

“You don’t want to stay behind?” I asked, with false nonchalance.

I didn’t look back at her, but I imagined her frowning. “Do you want me to stay behind?” she returned.

“It would be safer. I... wouldn’t have to worry about you.”

I braved a small peek at her in time to see the flash of hurt she quickly reined in. “Would you... rather I stayed behind?”

It was the wrong thing to have said, I could tell immediately. I shook my head. “I cannot decide for you.” I stepped away, feeling small.

I felt her eyes linger on me from a distance. I knew I should swallow my shame and reassure her, but I was all twisted up with worry for my father. Letting it be her choice was the best I could do right then. She stepped forward with a nod, a look of resolve on her face.

We followed Hannah and Levi’s footpath through the forest, making our way to Half Moon Bay, using the dim light of the sickle moon to light our steps forward. The

town was a short hike. When we arrived the place seemed deserted—there were no humans around or human vehicles on the road. Traffic lights blinked to a mechanical rhythm, and the pavement was damp with a recent and quick rain. We paused just outside the town border and crouched in a ditch as we held our breaths and waited for anyone or anything to pass by. The hour must have been too late because nothing did.

“Is there a hospital?” Diana asked. “The scrying mirror showed him on a smooth silver table. I think they have such things at the human hospital. We should start there.”

Jesse scoffed at her, “An obvious answer, but our enemies wouldn’t take him to a human hospital.”

Diana looked at the ground.

“We should try at least,” I said. “Leave no stone unturned.”

Hannah nodded. “I’ll take Diana to the hospital. We will ask around there.”

“I can check around town,” Levi volunteered. “There’s a bar that’s open late. Maybe one of the locals there has seen something.”

“Take Noah with you,” I said. “No one should go off on their own.”

“Then the two of us should scout the area marked on Terra’s map,” Jesse said.

I nodded at his plan. “Let’s meet back up in no more than two hours.”

Before we split to go our separate ways, Diana approached me a second time, her downcast eyes timidly tracing the ground.

“Diana,” I sighed. I didn’t like leaving her alone in this human town. But her visiting the hospital was a better choice than scouting the edge of town in near darkness. “I’m sorry—”

“No, don’t,” she said, meeting my gaze at last. Despite her quiet voice, there was a certainty in her tone. “There is no need for you to apologize. I understand your position is difficult. I should be the last of your concerns.” Her words adopted the edge of a wistful sigh. She started to pull away from me...

A cry echoed in my chest at this sudden barrier erected between us. I could not leave things as they were. Before she could disengage from me entirely, I reached for her hand, pulling her back to me, and crushing her to my chest for a few indulgent moments.

She stiffened with surprise only for a second before she accepted my embrace, burying herself in my chest, scrubbing her face against my shirt. Despite the fact that my world seemed to be fracturing around the edges, this felt like a moment that was right. I took my first full breath since we left the compound. Diana and I were together, where we belonged, no matter what atrocities raged around us.

She stepped back, looking just as bewildered as I felt. I held onto her hand until the last moment, letting go reluctantly with the faint brushing of our fingertips.

And then we separated for each of our jobs.

Just to be safe, Jesse and I remained in human form as we patrolled, starting from one side of the bay before making our way to the other, where the town’s luxury hotel sat on the cliffside. We relied on our sense of smell to mark our path through the darkness. We remained on alert for any sign of Nathaniel or the ammonia stench we detected earlier.

Our first pass yielded no results, but Jesse was dauntless, taking new paths to cover more area.

As we fell into a pattern, I took the opportunity to fill in some blanks. I asked, “What’s your history with Cersey?”

He flinched at the name, and I imagined him clenching his fists in the darkness. “The witch?”

“You and Dad took her amulet?” I prompted, working to keep my voice neutral. Clearly, he was not eager to share what happened. I needed to play this cool if I wanted to understand what this was all about.

He scoffed, “I took it. Me. I took her amulet. I just gave it to your dad for safe keeping.”

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“How did you manage that?” I tried to sound curious and impressed with his resourcefulness.

Flattery wasn’t bait enough, apparently. He said, “I went to her for help, and she repaid me in betrayal. Since then, I knew she was too dangerous to ignore. I couldn’t... take her down, so I protected the pack.”

“By taking the source of her magic.”

He nodded, more to himself than me. “Most of her magic. I was protecting the pack,” he repeated firmly.

Jesse would shut down entirely if I pushed. I didn’t pry further.

We were about to give up our search when a familiar odor assaulted our senses.

Ammonia.

We followed the smell to a seedy motel on the road outside of town. The place was in total disrepair. Its architecture was crumbling, the walls all moldy. It looked abandoned.

The closer we crept to the building, the stronger the stench was, mixed with other synthetic odors of trash plastic and electricity. The motel was a three-sided structure wrapped around the center parking lot.

One of the rooms on the first floor of the middle section had a door, slightly ajar, the

shine of a faint light within. This could be something. It reeked of the bizarre emanations. I had to check it out.

Meanwhile, Jesse swept the rest of the building, taking a cursory look through broken windows to determine if anyone else was there. He found no one, but the back of my neck prickled with the sensation of being watched.

Jesse paced the length of the parking lot with agitated steps. “Something’s not right.”

I stepped through the cracked door into the room with the flickering light, my eyes straining through the darkness to glimpse the shape of the musty bed and... a table with a number of metallic instruments reflecting the light of an LED flashlight discarded nearby. Twinges of iron and salt peaked through the overwhelming ammonia. My head rolled with a sickening spin. I stumbled back, clutching my abdomen with a wave of nausea. My foot bumped into something soft that was stuck in my path.

Its movement against my foot rustled a new note of familiarity in the air. When I picked it up, I recognized it immediately. Dad’s flannel shirt, the last thing I saw him in.

“You’re too late now.”

Cersey’s voice echoed from everywhere and nowhere. Where was she? I spun around, unable to see her in the darkness. My heart thumped against my chest, and I ran outside to find her standing in the middle of the parking lot with Jesse staring her down.

Gone was the kittenish, flippant Cersey from before. She was no longer amused. Her face was now smooth, impassive. And her drapery robes were replaced by an edgy sheath of leather pants and a crisp leather jacket.

“What have you done?” Jesse snarled.

“Me? The fault here is all yours. You had a chance to save him and you threw it away.”

My pulse accelerated. “Where is he? What’s happened to him?” Dad’s flannel felt damp in my hands, and I tried not to think about how much blood it had soaked up.

Cersey turned to me, offering a small, condescending frown. “Pity you did not take my advice, little alpha. Did you know there are humans who know a thing or two about your werewolf packs? You frighten them. And why not? You are stronger, faster.” She paused her riddle, then finished the thought. “Maybe notsmarter.”

“Say what you mean and be done with it!” Jesse yelled.

“You may have curbed my magic, wolf. For now. But do not think for a moment that I am powerless. Magic comes in many forms.” Cersey lowered her voice and I had to strain to hear her. “Hints of magic can turn a mind, you know.”

More riddles.

“I could enlist others to overcome my foes. Entice them to do my bidding. First, your alpha. Then, who knows what’s next?”

Jesse looked baffled, and I returned his glance with a grimace. I had no idea what she was talking about.

Cersey cocked her head. What did she hear?

Turning to me, she smirked. “Maybe your mate.”

As the witch stepped back, I saw Hannah and Diana running toward us. My eyes zeroed on Diana, her wild eyes taking in the scene. Cersey reached for her.

I moved without thinking, using some measure of my wolf abilities to block Cersey's path and planting myself between them. "You will not touch her."

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Cersey chuckled. “I would not dream of harming a beloved friend. But, have it your way.”

She looked over my shoulder. “Diana, my dear, you know where to find me if... well, you know.”

I struggled to make sense of the witch’s words as she disappeared into the night with ringing notes of her malicious laugh.

DIANA

Everything was wrong. We were hurtling toward some precipice, and I had no way of stopping us from tipping over the edge.

In the wake of Cersey’s words, Jesse turned his anger on me, demanding to know what the witch meant. I was paralyzed. I opened my mouth, but no words came. Orion looked at me with wide, vacant eyes, still gripping the stained flannel.

If... if Alpha Nathaniel was truly taken, or worse... I did not want to imagine the pain Orion must be feeling. The sharp reminder of my own father’s death made every anguish, every uncertainty, that much more acute.

I turned away from Jesse’s yelling and stepped closer to Orion, covering his hands with mine. “We should ask Mom to do the tracking spell again, with his shirt this time.”

Orion said nothing, but his hands fell away from mine.

Jesse huffed, hurrying off to gather the others and call off the search. Orion numbly turned around on the spot. He headed towards the forest without slowing, and once he had the cover of trees, he shifted to wolf-form within seconds and bolted for the compound.

I didn't want him to be alone. Dread knotted my stomach. I shifted and bounded after him.

We sprinted through the trees, but I kept some distance between us. Orion ran ahead and I couldn't tell if he even knew I was behind him. Orion. I reached out to him with my mind. No response. But I could sense the festering maw of his grief. I tried again, searching, listening. Foreign yet familiar perceptions bloomed inside me, and I could almost see the trees that Orion was seeing, feel the forest floor beneath his paws, hear the crack of brush and leaves through his ears. Was this our bond, connecting us, or my imagination? Whatever it was, I could feel how Orion's awareness was submerged beneath a dull haze of torment. It threatened to choke him, to swallow him whole.

I knew this pain too well. I would have done anything to protect him from it. My throat whined against the urge to howl, to let loose a peal of agony. Orion, I hummed to him through our bond.

I felt him recoil from me, disconnect with a jerk, and then I was alone with myself in my own head.

Weird.

But that meant he had heard me, didn't it? At least some of my thoughts must have reached him through that haze.

Our path stopped at my house. Orion waited awkwardly at the porch as he shifted

back into human form, the tattered flannel secured in his hands. I went inside to wake Mom. Her scrying materials were still there, splayed out on the table.

When I returned downstairs with her, Orion had let himself in. He was smoothing down the map and leaning over the San Francisco Peninsula, looking at the faded circle. Mom was already lighting candles. Not a word was spoken.

I stood there, with nothing to contribute.

I was useless. Worse than useless. I was tangled up with Cersey because of my disloyalty, my weakness. And now Orion was close to the truth of it. I said nothing and slipped out of the house to sit on the porch steps, burying my face in my hands.

But I still didn't know what the hell was going on. Cersey was definitely complicit in Nathaniel's disappearance. But what did I have to do with it? Why had she called me her beloved friend? She was a crazy old hag. In what universe was I her friend? We had an arrangement, that's all. And I'd decided even before the Blue Flower Moon that I wasn't going to go behind Orion's back to take the amulet from his father. Hadn't I?

And anyway, I wouldn't get that damned amulet for her under any circumstances now that I knew it would only make her more dangerous.

Remorse flooded my entire body. It didn't matter. I'd disobeyed my mother, disrespected our pack, and succumbed to my own petty heartache when I sought out Cersey's cottage that night. I invited her evil, drank her vile bitters, agreed to her payment. And now Selena was gone. And Orion... And Nathaniel. I was going to be sick.

I lifted my face for a moment, staring at the sickle moon. The Goddess was entering her monthly slumber, meaning she was less likely to hear prayers. I recited a

protection mantra eighteen times, hoping she would hear me anyway.

Goddess, help me.

The front door creaked open, and I stood quickly as Orion shuffled outside.

“What happened? What did you see?”

The flannel was no longer in his hands. His eyes were hollow. “The mirror was black, and the map remained untouched.”

My hand flew to my mouth, and I gasped. “Does that mean—”

“The alpha is gone.”

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I didn't hear Jesse's approach, but suddenly he was standing behind me, translating the spell's results on Orion's behalf.

Tears filled my eyes. "Orion, I'm so—"

Jesse brushed past me. "We should discuss what this means for the pack, for you."

Orion shook his head, "Not now."

For once, Jesse didn't bristle at the disagreement. He understood the gravity of the news. But his stance was firm. "Yes, the mantle must be passed for the pack to survive."

Orion looked numbly at the ground, and I couldn't bear it any longer. I raised my voice to Jesse. "It's the middle of the night; nothing needs to be done right now. Orion just needs a few minutes to process—"

"And what do you know about what Orion needs?" Jesse snarled. "If you and Cersey are such dearfriends, how long did you know about her plan to get rid of Nathaniel?"

The truth should have been easy to argue, to throw back at him. But my breath hitched and my tongue swelled.

"Do not speak to my mate that way," Orion warned in a low voice.

I wasn't sure who was more surprised, me or Jesse, but both of our mouths hung slack as Orion came roaring back to us. Jesse recovered first, "Orion—"

“Life carries on,” he said, alive and fully present. “The anointing ceremony must happen soon. The pack won’t survive without an alpha.”

Orion took a step toward Jesse, dropping a heavy hand on his shoulder. “But you will not speak to your alpha’s mate in such a way.”

Jesse scowled, but he didn’t argue. He shrugged out of Orion’s grasp. “I will start preparing at sunrise, and we will have the ceremony at sunset,” he said gruffly.

Orion nodded at this, a clear dismissal as Jesse took off in wolf-form. Then he turned to me, reaching for my hands. “I am sorry, Diana. You do not deserve his abuse.”

The little circles he rubbed onto the back of my hands felt like coarse sandpaper. What if I deserve those abuses? My mouth went dry.

Orion kissed my knuckles, but the gesture felt disconnected. I felt no warmth in that gentle touch. “He should respect you as our future luna.”

Our future luna.

My stomach twisted, threatening to hurl the remainder of my last meal. I backed away from Orion, took a deep breath, and decided, foolishly, that it was a good time to tell him everything.

“Orion, I...” The words that felt like a betrayal died on my lips.

He frowned, “What is it?”

He needed to know everything. He deserved that.

“I would never hurt you or the pack.”

Orion stood stock still, eyes clear and listening with a furrowed brow.

“Cersey. Of course she is not I, would never consider myself,” I fumbled my words. Orion did not move a muscle. “Friends. No, I am not afriendto Cersey.”

“Of course, Diana—”

“But,” I stopped him, having to get the rest of it out, “but there was a time... I did see her. Right before the coupling ceremony.” The words seemed to trip on their way past my tongue.

Something in his face cracked. “What are you talking about?” His eyes were suddenly colder, narrowing, like he was working something out.

“I never meant to, I mean, I was desperate, and I couldn’t very well talk to Mom about it and Selena and we were fighting all the time and I couldn’t sleep, I wasn’t able to concentrate, and I wanted to help—” No. That was a lie. “I needed help, okay? Ineeded helpand I didn’t know what else to do. So I went to the witch and asked her to take my feelings away.”

He just stared at me.

“My feelings for you.”

Silence.

“And she said the potion would illuminate my path and I would have control of my life again and Selena would be happy and that the half moon was a symbol of hope, but I owed her payment, I just had to get her amulet back from Nathaniel—” The words tumbled out of my mouth.

At the sound of his father’s name, Orion’s head snapped up. He shifted his body, put his hands up to stop my insane ramblings, and cocked his head before murmuring, “What?”

I swallowed loudly. “I agreed to get her amulet back from—”

Equal measures of shock and disbelief erupted from the crack in his face. “Diana, what the hell are you talking about?”

Tears spilled from my eyes and slid down my cheeks. My chest cleaved open, pulsing fresh pain with every rapid heartbeat. “I am so sorry, Orion.”

“You knew about the amulet? What else do you know about this? What has Cersey done? What is she planning to do?” He raged.

I shrank away, “I don’t know! I don’t know anything more than that.”

He regarded me, and his expression transformed from red hot anger to icy cold disgust. “How could you, Diana?”

I had never intended to get the amulet for her. The potion didn't even work... but then again, maybe it had worked just as Cersey intended. I stepped forward and reached for his hands, begging to explain further.

Orion pulled into himself and jerked back like I was a venomous snake about to strike.

"No." He had a look on his face I'd never seen before. It was final.

I stood, tears streaming down my face, dumb and numb and resigned to his fair conclusion.

"It's over," he croaked in barely a whisper.

I turned around with that final judgment, shaking inside my own worst nightmare. And then I ran. I ran away from my house, from my future, from the love of my life.

DIANA

I would never escape that last flash of betrayal crossing his face. But fear and self-loathing swiftly carried my feet away. And I did not stop running. Not for a long while.

I scaled the cliff Cara and I climbed on my first day back at training. It was a familiar sight in the gulch. Dad used to bring me here when I was little. He'd tell me stories about the pack guard, teach me special tracking skills, and share secret mantras with me that I took for a game. Clever. I thought we were having fun, and all the while, he was instilling in me a foundation of discipline, teaching me how to focus, how to control myself.

When I was older, we'd climb together, run the trails, and he even taught me some

combat skills. All very handy when I'd made it into the guard. I'd catch Dad watching me during sparring sessions sometimes, beaming at me when I'd taken down one of the guys.

Then I remembered his mini lectures on family, duty, and honor. I could recite them in my sleep, and when he'd start on one of them, I'd roll my eyes and repeat the words along with him. He would always chuckle at that. I was such a brat. I'd do anything to have him next to me, reciting those words again.

Then again, maybe not. He would be so disappointed in me right now.

As I sat on one of the rocky bluffs, the site of the valley below provided little relief. What was I thinking? Company with my own spiraling thoughts was not the salve I'd hoped. When my go-to mantra failed me, I stood and paced around the outcropping, futilely trying to scrub my mind of the source of my shame and its consequences—Dad, Selena, the witch, Orion.

This was some kind of curse. I didn't understand it, but I needed to fix it.

But how? If only I understood magic better.

Just then, the answer bloomed before me. Selena understood magic.

I'd gone with her on several of her silly human-scouting escapades to college campuses many moons ago—long before I could have imagined her ever leaving home and going to UC Berkeley for any length of time. The night she left, I'd gone through Mom's maps and re-oriented myself. I wouldn't have let my sister wander off into the world if I didn't know where she was.

I knew the path to Berkeley. Fifty miles or so. I crouched to the ground, shifting onto all fours. My wolf could get me there in less than two hours.

My muscles screamed, but I ignored the sharp spasms in my lungs and ran without pause. I needed to do something before Orion was anointed as alpha. Jesse was right about that—the pack was at its most vulnerable right now. Could that have something to do with why Cersey took Nathaniel?

Dawn streaked the sky with orange and gray, fighting gathering storm clouds as the sun peered over the horizon. The human campus felt too open, I was too exposed here. I quickly shifted back into human form, clinging to the shadows of some of the trees, and scanned my surroundings. The trees were unnatural. They were small, perfect. Groomed. The grass too. And where were the insects? I sniffed at the idea of human hands planting trees and wondered at the purpose.

Early morning runners in fresh, bright attire barely glimpsed me as they passed by. That suited me, but I also realized that I was a mess. I hadn't thought about how I'd look after I shifted back and donned the ragged tank top and leggings that I'd dragged along.

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I shook my head. Who cared what I looked like. I needed to find Selena, and this was a big campus. I hoped she didn't sleep as late here as she had at home. Goddess willing she would join some of these college students on their little jogs with their fat, squishy shoes and flashy outfits. At least she'd be getting some kind of training, even if it was a pathetic human sort of exercise.

But how could she stand the smells here? I couldn't help but flare my nostrils. Even in my human form, the life scent of forest and ocean were masked by synthetic, human smells—coffee and grease and... what was that? Rotten egg? No, Selena knew their name for it. Sulfur? Something to do with the oil fields and the algae and seaweed swept in from the coast.

I closed my eyes and tried to focus on my sister, trying to pick up on her trail of yarrow, honey, and desert rose. I found it, threading with the other smells of the campus, and took a cautious step forward to follow it.

There seemed like far too few humans for how big this place was. My path led me to an enormous structure with white columns and wide stone steps. A nearby sign told me this was the library, and there she was! I found my sister, looking for all the world like she totally belonged there. She was relaxed, chatting with another young woman, all smiles and good humor.

I watched her for a while. She looked... perfect. My heart yearned to go to her, to hug her, to tell her everything, to ask her—

Selena's companion noticed me watching them. She had thick auburn red hair, and her broad smile slackened the moment our eyes met. Something in the air shifted, and

I detected hints of sugar and cinnamon from her. An odd scent.

My sister, noticing her friend's distraction, turned toward me. Her smile vanished too.

I took a breath, blew it out, and stepped forward. Have courage.

I approached awkwardly, holding my hand up with forced nonchalance. "Hey, Selena."

She turned to her friend, dismissing her with a quiet, "I'll see you later, Kat." Kat hesitated, but with a confident nod from Selena, she headed up the stairs into the library. We watched her go in silence. Then Selena turned the full force of her glare on me. "What do you want?" she snapped. "I'm not going back."

Something about her suspicion made me sad, and I absently scratched my arm in shame. "No, that's not it."

My answer eased some of the tension in her shoulders, but she crossed her arms, waiting.

I took a deep breath. "I... need your help."

She blinked. "My help?"

I was overwhelmed with how much I missed her, and how much I needed her, and my words tumbled out. "I... I made a mess. You remember Cersey? That witch, who lives on the island in the river? I went to her place. I met her. She is super creepy. I know Mom said we should never, but..." I gave her a shiver-shrug, a twin thing, or at least it used to be. "I went before the Blue Flower Moon. It was insane. I made a bargain with her." I was babbling.

Selena stood quietly, her face a mask of equanimity.

“The pack is cursed, Selena. Alpha Nathaniel’s gone. And now Orion is to be alpha. I need to find some way to reverse the curse.”

I had to make her understand. She was uncharacteristically sober and even-keeled. I was the one keening, coming apart. I wrung my hands, searching her face for some sort of acknowledgment.

Her features softened as she stepped toward me, taking both my hands and holding them as we did when we were girls. “Slow down. It’s going to be okay.”

The rushing in my ears stopped. I could feel my twin again. I could breathe.

I squeezed her hands, tears pricking at my eyes, and nodded once.

She didn’t blast me with questions or accusations. Instead, Selena led me to a small cafe on campus. We sat in a secluded corner booth, and I let everything out. I told her everything, why I went to Cersey in the first place, the potion, the amulet, the freaky wolf that attacked Orion, what Jesse said, what happened to Nathaniel, and how Cersey said I was her beloved friend. How Orion had ended it, and that he was right to do so. My cheeks burned with shame, but the purge felt right. Selena didn’t interrupt, she just listened intently to my story with her hands folded.

When I was finished, she asked questions.

“So you think Cersey cursed you with that potion? You think that potion made Orion your mate?”

I couldn’t look at her. Mortified, I said it again. “I am so sorry, Selena.”

To my utter surprise, she actually laughed. “Don’t be.”

I was confused. I looked around.

“Hey,” she softened her tone and leaned in. “You did nothing wrong. You were in pain, so you looked for some help.”

Relief washed through me. But maybe she didn’t hear me right, so I tried to clarify, “But I let my obsession with Orion—”

“But you are wrong about something,” she interrupted. I shut up.

“Cersey didn’t curse you.”

I blinked as she calmly took a sip of her coffee. “What do you mean?”

“If the amulet is the source of her power, then she had no means to curse you.”

I wasn’t following, which must have shown on my face because she spoke more slowly as she continued, “She didn’t corrupt the fates to bond you with Orion. Even with the amulet she wouldn’t have that kind of power. The two of you...” She wrinkled her nose. “It was always meant to be.”

A surge of hope and gratitude tried to bubble up, but I clenched my stomach, forcing it back down. “But—”

“You’re not hearing me, Diana. How many lovesick people have secretly begged mom for a love spell? You remember human women coming to the house looking for Mom? And how the elders were all hush hush about it?” I did, vaguely. “Anyway, can’t be done. Not really. There are enchantments that can manipulate minds and influence natural energies, you know that. But force a fated bond? Not possible.” She shook her head with confidence and I sat back in my booth seat.

“Mom has told me quite a lot about Cersey. Information only the elder council knows. She only told me because I was supposed to be the future pack seer.” She paused, regarding me. “Quit chewing on your nails,” she said and I dropped my hand to my lap.

“Cersey is a powerful sorceress, that’s true. So, we need to talk more about all of the

rest of what's going on—what happened to Nathaniel, the amulet and all.” She seemed apprehensive for the first time since we'd sat down. Then she brightened, looked me straight in the eye and said, “But you and Orion? You two are bonded by the fates. And trust me when I tell you, big sister, even Cersey is powerless to change that.”

She took another sip of her coffee. “I'm surprised Mom hasn't explained this to you.”

“But I saw Cersey's magic—” I began to protest.

Selena waved it off. “Parlor tricks, nothing more. You know she didn't have her amulet, and I'm telling you, that's the source of her most powerful magic. If you ask me, she wants you to think you're cursed. She's manipulating you. And it looks like she wants to use that to her advantage.”

I stared at my dirty, chewed-up fingernails, considering her words.

She cleared her throat. “Look, if Orion is being anointed Alpha today, you should be there for him. As his mate, of course. But also...” She trailed off for a moment, eyes losing focus. “If Cersey is up to something, that would be the perfect time to attack.”

I nodded, standing. “You should come too.”

She frowned, immediately shaking her head. “No, my place is here.”

A new sense of urgency and panic prevented me from arguing with her. I needed to get back to Orion.

I bid goodbye to my sister, pressing a quick kiss to her cheek. She shooed me off but smiled about it, and the knowledge that we were really okay swelled in my chest, filling me with warmth.

I crossed the length of the campus once more, trying to look casual, and blend in. More humans were out and about, carrying so much human stuff in their shoulder bags and backpacks. I made quick work of the distance, passing by a building marked Valley Life Sciences Building near the edge of the forest.

I didn't shift just yet, making sure no one was following me as I trekked across rugged trails and footpaths made by hikers. I didn't want to risk being seen by a backpacker. Out of the blue, my senses slammed against a sharp, sickening odor that flattened everything else. Again, ammonia. Instantly on alert, I peered through the shadows around me. That's when I caught a glimpse of several wolves, like the one that had attacked Orion, sprinting south. Dread soured my stomach. I shifted and sprinted after them.

ORION

Jesse tried, unsuccessfully, to lift my spirits with talk of the fights he'd been in. He never had a mate, though, so he couldn't understand how my chest was ripped apart. So I didn't respond to his war stories and sat silently in my chair while Terra fussed over me.

The pack seer said nothing of either of her daughters' disappearances. In fact, she said little at all, drawing shapes and patterns in the air around me with a smoldering stick of incense. The sharp herbs seemed to burn the hairs in my nose.

It was midmorning, and my small plate of breakfast remained untouched. Members of the pack were constantly streaming through the front room of my father's house to offer condolences and small gifts to their future alpha. I felt wretched. I was alone now, and unworthy of their respect.

I hadn't slept, instead thinking about Diana and what I'd done. I could blame my grief, but was there really any excuse for how I shut her down like that? She was my

mate, my only family now, and I acted like a petulant pup and said it was “over.”

Dad, I need you.

A sob threatened to escape, so I cleared my throat. I could not fall apart now.

What was Jesse saying, something about the succession ritual?

“You have to stay in human form today, only shifting when the sun disappears below the horizon. Don’t forget the vows you have to repeat. You should practice memorizing them. Cara, Noah, and I will be your personal guard.”

I sighed, feeling even more alone, knowing that Jesse would not be leaving my side for the day. How did my father manage to deal with him?

Cara knocked on the doorframe, an unnecessary courtesy since the door was already open. She had a small box in her hand, and with a nod from me, she approached cautiously. Terra looked up from her work, sharing a meaningful look with the lieutenant.

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Cara cleared her throat. “My alpha,” she began.

I shook my head. “I’m not alpha yet, but what is it?”

Her eyes fell to the wooden box in her hands. She glanced at Terra again. “As you know, my father, as the pack’s blacksmith, works with metals. Sometimes, he has to use a delicate touch...” She cleared her throat. “Perhaps this is best for Terra to explain.”

Terra accepted the small parcel reverently, and she turned to face me. “This was my late husband’s wish. He sent this off to Cara’s father before he passed in the hopes our daughters would find a mate.” She coughed, wiping at her nose and I realized that she was getting choked up.

I stood up and put my hands over hers. She slowly opened the lid.

“These are rings for you and Diana, newly cast from the silver rings that her father Elias and I wore to represent our union.” Her voice lowered to a faint whisper. “I hope you will accept them.”

The silver rings looked like twisting vines. They were absolutely perfect. I had to swallow past a dry lump in my throat. “Yes, of course, I would be honored.”

She patted my hand as she released them. “Diana will be back. She is strong and loyal. She would never abandon us.”

I wanted to believe Terra’s words, but hours passed, and there was still no sign of her

emerging from the trees. I trained myself not to look for her. To focus on other tasks.

There was plenty to do before the succession ceremony. I had to bathe in fragrant rosewater. My hair was tamed into tight braids. Terra drew symbols on my arms and face with sticks of charcoal. She explained their meaning I think, but I couldn't concentrate, I didn't hear her. Finally, I was dressed in a dark shift, an open robe that revealed my bare chest. Everyone in the KU pack started making their way to the ceremony site, the beach where the coupling ceremony had taken place.

The afternoon sun cast fiery rays across the sky, and members of the elder council and the pack guard, dressed in clean ceremonial linens, surrounded me for protection. When we reached the beach, familiar torches marked a path in the sand, funneling the witnesses into a single long line. At its end was a woven mat, the place where I would be anointed as alpha.

I tried to take in all the faces around me. I recognized many, but there were a few I didn't know well. They trusted me to be their leader. It felt premature, entirely wrong. I swallowed hard against the hot, slick bile rising in the back of my throat.

How was I supposed to lead or protect them when I didn't even know what happened to my father? Hell. I couldn't even keep my mate by my side.

I stood on the mat and waited. Terra presided over the ceremony, and I could tell everyone was anxious to get started. It was well known that a pack without an alpha was at its weakest, most susceptible to enemies and danger.

“We thank everyone for their presence as we recognize a new alpha to lead us, a new wolf to protect us, a new friend to save us.”

Murmurs of affirmation rippled through the gathering.

Terra turned to me. “Kneel.”

I did, slowly and smoothly sinking to my knees. Terra lifted her hands in the air and flower petals escaped her fingers, scattering on the wind.

Her chanting mesmerized everyone:

“Goddess of Night, wrap your child

in your strength so he may cast down the foes

that would see our end.

Goddess of Light, shine your beacon

on his path so he may see the journey

laid before his feet.

Goddess of Truth—”

A chilling howl interrupted the seer’s words. I immediately jumped to my feet as Jesse and the others swarmed around me.

Then there were more howls, from the cliffs, from the edge of the beach. My pack pressed together tightly, eyes darting around as they searched for the source.

Then a wolf, the same one that attacked me in the forest with Diana, stepped out of the darkness, lips curled over yellowed teeth. He bore no vestiges of his former injuries. I tried to push my way through the people surrounding me.

“No, you cannot shift!” Jesse barked, shoving me back by the shoulder. “If you do it before the ceremony finishes, we will lose our alpha and the Goddess’s magic forever.”

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“I have to dosomething,” I shot back as more wolves stepped into view. I counted at least five. With our warriors present, it wouldn’t have been a daunting number, except there were innocent people here from our pack. People who couldn’t fight.

Before we had a chance to respond, the first wolf pushed forward, jumping from his hind legs, and launching himself toward me. I braced for impact.

None came. I blinked and caught sight of the glossy chestnut coat of the beautiful wolf that slammed into my attacker. She bared her fangs as they collided to a stop, just before sinking her teeth into the wolf’s throat. With a whine, it stopped moving.

Diana.

Her eyes lifted, immediately finding mine in the crowd. Instinctively, I moved toward her, but Jesse held me back.

She hurled herself towards another wolf making its way to me.

The pack scattered in the face of this threat, and I watched as the warriors sprang into action, shifting seamlessly and decimating the remaining wolves. More enemies revealed themselves from the shadows, but as the tide of battle turned against them, they retreated into the forest.

When the remaining ones were dealt with, Diana approached me, shrinking into her human form with a fluid motion. The smell of ammonia mixed with the metallic odor of blood was everywhere. Jesse and Cara rounded up our pack to assess injuries. Thank Goddess, everyone was okay.

Diana stood before me, ducking her head in shame. “I am sorry for leaving. I should have stayed and fought to explain myself better. Please, hear me out—”

I lifted her chin to see her face, and saw she was unharmed. Of course she was. She was fierce in battle; I already knew that. “You have nothing to apologize for. I owe you an apology, my beautiful warrior luna.”

Her face flushed. “I should have been here sooner,” she persisted.

I silenced her complaints with a searing kiss. Her lips were slightly salty, no doubt the sweat of battle, and I pulled her tight against my chest. When we separated for air, her lips were still a hair’s breadth from mine. I whispered against them, “You were exactly where you needed to be.”

People were watching us now, I realized. She started to pull away from me, but I held fast.

I pulled the box Terra gave me from my pocket. Diana looked on in confusion until I opened the lid, revealing its contents. She recognized them immediately. Her lip quivered as her eyes shifted to her mom and then back to me, as if making sense of what she was seeing.

I picked up a ring and held it between my thumb and forefinger. “Diana, you are perfect exactly as you are. We are bonded by fate, now and always, and no witch or curse could ever touch that. You are a blessing to me, to this pack. We rely on your strength, and I want nothing in return except your love. Please accept the ring of your father and agree to be my luna.”

She took the twist of silver vines with shaking fingers. Her eyes were wet in the light of the sinking sun. “I—”

I silenced her with another kiss and whispered the words I should have said long ago.
“I love you.”

The ceremony continued without further interruption, and as Terra chanted the words and I recited the vows, it was Diana who adorned me with a new amulet, its pendant a wooden carving of a three-headed wolf. The amulet of the alpha.

And as I rose as Alpha, I took the hand of the beautiful creature who would be my luna. My Diana.

DIANA

As we made our way back to the compound, it felt like floating through the clouds. My skin tingled where he held my hand, where his arm brushed against mine, and the focus of my awareness sharpened to the new weight on my left ring finger.

As we neared the Alpha House—now Orion’s house—we took our leave of the others. We had private business to attend to. Orion made sure to lock the door behind us.

Orion was patient and present to hear what I was ready to share with him. With a deep breath, I started from the beginning. I was sure this time, my voice steady and my words easier to speak. This time, Orion held my hands and leaned in. I told him about my trip to Berkeley, my reunion with Selena, my confession to her, and what she’d said in return. When Orion nodded his understanding, with love in his eyes, and asked for my forgiveness, hot tears of gratitude and healing and wholeness nearly sprang from my eyes.

We were forged in that fire. No doubts or misunderstanding remained. Only love. We sighed in each other's arms.

I’m home.

Suddenly, I was aware of the dirt and blood covering my skin. I must have looked like a mess. I subtly sniffed...

And I stink.

Orion read my mind. He rose and extended a hand, without saying a word, and took us into his bathroom.

He ran warm water to the tub, and as we waited for it to fill, he slowly undressed me. It was difficult for me to catch my breath, and he peppered each new expanse of my exposed skin with a series of reverent kisses—around my navel, against my shoulder, trailing along my legs. I trembled beneath his touch, which spurred the kisses more. More heat, more tongue that swirled against me, heedless of the grim that covered my body.

I didn't realize when the bathtub was filled, only aware of when Orion suddenly swept me up in his arms and gently lowered me into the steamy water.

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As he kneeled over the tub, his hands took great care in washing my body with a small bar of lavender soap. I tried to relax into his touch, relishing the soft strokes on my arms, but as he ventured to my breasts, I squirmed beneath those ministrations, a brighter heat licking between my legs.

He noticed how my hips bucked, abandoning the soap momentarily as his exploring fingers coaxed their way inside me, and I reveled in a different sort of wetness that eclipsed every other thought.

I couldn't keep my hips from bucking again. In response, Orion used his free hand to hold me down, gently but firmly, and his talented fingers stroked new fire inside me, sending me climbing to a sacred apex. I weakly gasped Orion's name.

I shuddered in the bathtub, gripping his arm tightly as I sank back to the earth, to the languid strokes of his fingers.

When I caught my breath, he lifted me, wrapped me in a towel, and lifted me again, carrying me down the hallway to the bedroom. Once he deposited me on the mattress, the towel fell away, now unimportant, as he nuzzled against my inner thigh.

I was eager to the point of panting already, and he wasted no time. He kneeled in front of me, and with both hands, he spread my legs wide and dove into me. His tongue, long, wet and warm, expertly teased and tasted. I arched my back, and my legs twitched of their own accord. I floated on a vibrating cloud of exquisite bliss, already building toward another climax.

He lifted his head, face still dripping with my sex, and rose to meet my lips anew. I

tasted myself on his lips, and the muscles of my abdomen shuddered. He pressed a hand there, keeping me flat on the bed, placing himself between my legs.

I raised my hips to meet him, his tip plunging into me with a masterful stroke that had me gasping his name again. He held us there, suspended in that moment, and I wanted nothing more than to stay that way forever.

Except when he pulled back, leaving me empty for an excruciating moment, only to fill me once more. That was what I wanted. And so the cycle continued as he thrust into me, then pulled himself out, and I clawed at his chest begging for more. He obliged the pounding with a few grunts, and he hovered lower over me, capturing each new gasp I released with his mouth.

“What do you want, Diana?” he murmured against my lips.

There were no thoughts. No words took shape for me. I could only moan with pleasure.

He paused, delaying my pleasure as he waited for his answer. “Tell me.”

He nipped a little at my neck. There was only one word that I could manage. “You.”

He chuckled, dark and pleased at that. “And you shall have me. Forever.”

One more thrust, and another, and we gasped in unison. When he found his release, I followed suit, joining him in the quivering darkness as tears gathered in my eyes and I moaned the name of my mate.

“Orion.”

EPILOGUE

It was easy to greet the day when everything was perfect. And everything was perfect between Orion and me, splendidly so.

I woke up alone in the bed, which didn't bother me. I knew he was busy with his new alpha duties. Besides, my naked form twisted in the blankets was a sweet reminder of how we ended the previous evening. Before I cleaned myself up for the day, I could still smell his lingering presence on me, especially between my legs. It was enough to make me flush with desire again.

But I had duties too. We weren't married, not yet, but I would be pack Luna when it happened. Still, I trained with the guard, tended where I could to the needs of each wolf in our pack, and offered advice when Jesse talked Orion's ear off. I knew my purpose, my place and privilege in the pack.

Today would have been no different, but Cara stopped me as soon as I left the alpha house, a grim look on her face. "Orion is with the healers. You should join him."

As she led the way, I frowned. Wondering what tragedy had come to haunt our pack.

Mom sometimes worked with the healers, offering her knowledge of herbs and salves in service to the pack. So I wasn't surprised when she was there, waiting just outside the healer's hut. Her face mirrored the grim lines of Cara's. Dread twisted my stomach as she took my hand and pulled me inside.

Normally, there were cots inside, but today they had all been pushed aside to make room for large masses of something on the floor covered in plastic tarps. The stench, the slight decay and stinging ammonia, told me all I needed to know. These were the bodies of the wolves who attacked us.

The healer, Mica, shook his head, arms folded as he considered the sight before him. Orion stood next to him, and I eagerly joined his side, snaking my arm around his

waist. He absently stroked my back.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

Mica responded. “I’ve studied these as much as I can. I don’t know if this is magic or some human technology, but I’ve never seen anything like this before. They are not natural wolves. You well know that when we die as our wolf, we revert back to human form. These...thingsare not like us.”

Mica shook his head, stroking his graying beard.

Orion held me a little tighter. “They were after something. They were afterme.”

“They are no better than mindless beasts,” Mica said.

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I gave a small squeeze, reassuring myself that Orion was fine.

“The stink of humans is all over them. Humans created them, maybe controlled them, these...collaredwolves.”

“For what purpose?” I asked.

Orion shook his head. “Nothing good. Those humans that were on our border?” he speculated. “Maybe these wolves were some kind of weapon.”

“We’ve never seen a weapon like this.”

“Or an experiment? An experimental weapon.”

“To attack us?” Mica asked.

There were too many questions. And Orion didn’t have an answer. “It seems that way. All I know is that this further affirms our fears about humans. They’re dangerous, especially if they’re using these monstrous... things to attack us.”

Jesse stomped into the hut just then. “And what are we going to do about it?”

To my surprise, Orion turned to meet Jesse’s gaze evenly. Something about the silent, simmering rage in his shining eyes chilled me. “We have to protect ourselves. This is my command as Alpha. From now on, we shall avoid humans... and we will treat trespassers as the genuine threat they are.”

I looked up at him. “Are you sure that’s the right thing to do?”

He managed a small, half smile, stroking my cheek as if he could wipe all my fears away. “For you? For our family? I would die before I risk losing you. We have no other choice, my love.”

He leaned down to kiss my frown away. Selena’s voice rang in my head, reminding me that we had good relations with some humans in town, and that she now lived with all humans all the time. I didn’t want to believe that all of them were dangerous.

But Orion was right to be on guard. We’d been attacked and who knew whether other beasts lurked in the shadows. And as much as I knew he’d protect me, I knew that I would die to protect him.

We were Alpha and future Luna, mates bound together by the fates. If he was hurt, so was I. His death spelled my own. Orion and I were inextricably woven together for the rest of time, and I could tell by the silent look we shared, he understood this truth as well...

I was his. He was mine.