



Rejected By The Alpha Heir

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Category: Romance, Paranormal

Description: He claimed me, left me pregnant, and chose another.

My ex-fiancé was a cold, ruthless alpha who tortured his fiancée's heart for six months.

Hopeful smiles and carefully prepared meals only brought verbal and emotional violence. He even taught his friends to call me "burden"

And swore to his father that he would never marry me.

Now, I have a perfect life and noble profession in human society.

Friends and family surround me like stars around the moon.

I'll never go back to the pack, never go back to him.

Even he rejects his new mate and begs on his knees.

Even he is my daughter's father.

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Chapter One

Yelena

A deafening crash shatters the silence of the night, followed by frantic shouts and pounding on my cottage door. I jolt upright, my heart racing.

“Yelena! We need a healer!! Yelena! Hurry!”

The words send a chill down my spine. I scramble out of bed, my mind racing. What could have happened that would require me so urgently? I throw on my shoes and grab a sweater, pulling it over my head as I lean over the sink to splash water on my face. Quickly, I pull my hair back in a low ponytail. Anxious energy courses through my veins, and I resist the urge to fret with my hands.

Something terrible must have happened.

I’ve only been training as a healer for a few months. My knowledge is limited to basic salves and bandages. If the injury involves magic, I’m not sure I can help.

My palms sweat as I consider the possibilities. As wolf shifters, we possess the ability to heal ourselves unless the injury is particularly severe or involves magic.

“Your pack needs you. Whatever it is, you have to try,” I tell myself, squaring my shoulders.

I step out of my room and close the door gently. A cluster of three guards are waiting

for me on my cozy front porch.

“What’s going on?” I ask Jason, one of Alpha Malaki’s advisors. His face is grim and ice-cold fear starts to seep into my heart. “Is it the Alpha?” I ask in a hushed tone.

He shakes his head. “No. It’s the Alpha’s heir. He isn’t doing well. He was injured.”

My jaw drops open and I freeze in place, processing his words. Austin.

Please, Moon Goddess, let him be okay. Let me be able to heal his injury.

Jason is already halfway across the courtyard and I hurry to catch up with him. I have so many questions.

“What happened?” I ask, trying to quell my racing heart. “How did he get injured?”

“Attacked. The bleeding won’t stop,” he answers, shortly. My heart pounds harder.

The shouts and howls around us are getting louder, spreading the word. A severe injury to the Alpha’s heir will bring much of the pack here to gather and await word.

“He’s in here,” Jason says, stopping in front of a larger bungalow. He pushes open the door to reveal a small waiting area and apothecary with doors leading to the private healing room situated toward the back.

The soft, light, and pungent scent of antiseptic and healing herbs washes over me. It’s comforting in a familiar sort of way. On days when it’s hard for me to understand my role in this pack, I come in here to sit or work. Rolling bandages, compounding tinctures—there’s no job too small for me to be willing to help out with. This small room full of herbs, tonics, and salves always makes sense to me.

“Through here,” Jason says gruffly, leading me toward a private room. The sight inside stops me cold.

There’s a limp body on the cot in the center of the small room, surrounded by people. It’s so crowded that I can hardly move to assess my patient.

“Make way. Some of you, out,” Jason orders, forcing the shifters to scatter.

I’m grateful for his help, but as the guards all file out, I scent the tell-tale coppery metallic smell that I’d know anywhere. Blood.

I swallow hard. It’s not just any blood—it’s his blood. I’d recognize that scent anywhere.

“Miss Yelena.” One of the remaining guards steps back, giving me a respectful nod. I nod back, trying to hide the fact that my hands are trembling.

“Who attacked you?” I ask softly.

“Highland Pack,” Jason answers. “We were ambushed.”

Several of the packmates crowd in the doorway growl and the blood drains from my face.

Highland Pack’s territory borders ours. They have been one of our largest rivals for years. While skirmishes between our soldiers have happened from time to time, nothing has ever been this severe.

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Going after Austin like this is tantamount to a declaration of war. I shiver and then try to focus.

The war will be dealt with by our Alpha and his men. I wasn't called down here to deal with that. I was called to attend to a severe injury. I wish my mentors were here to guide me. Our pack is fortunate to have several gifted healers, but they have been loaned to one of our allied packs to conduct a training exercise. Even if they called them immediately after Austin was injured, they were still at least thirty minutes away. It's up to me to at least start the treatment.

I take a deep breath to remind myself that they believed in me. They were the ones who left me here, confident that I could handle whatever was thrown at me.

The eyes of all of Austin's men track me as I dash out of the room and into the small apothecary. I hurry, flinging open drawers and pulling out thick white rolls of bandages and healing tinctures. Being the one to attend Austin is a lot of pressure, and I have to remind myself to stay calm.

By the time I've gathered an armful of supplies and returned to the small room, it feels like my heart is going to beat right out of my chest.

I set them down carefully and look down at the unconscious body on the table. He's important to us. Not just as the son of our beloved Alpha Malaki and Luna Elizabeth, but to me personally.

My intended mate. I can't lose him. I won't.

“Oh my Goddess!” I whisper, looking him over with a lump in my throat.

There’s blood everywhere, but the gashes on his arm and his abdomen draw my attention first.

“I need some clean water in a basin and the tin of salve!” I call out, my eyes never leaving him. Someone behind me hurries to comply and a small basin is thrust onto the table next to me, sloshing over.

The gash in his arm is bleeding heavily, with a small pool of blood appearing on the floor. Someone has already tried to bandage it, but without the healing salve to assist in closing the wound, it has already bled through.

With shaking hands, I open the tin and start to spread salve on the clean bandages. If I can get the wound closed, he might heal faster.

Austin’s eyes start to flutter and I lean forward, eager to see those silvery orbs.

“Austin,” I whisper to him, “can you hear me?”

He doesn’t respond verbally, but the fingers on his hand start to twitch. I reach out to tug on the blood-soaked bandage wrapped around his arm.

He doesn’t move as I carefully unravel it, revealing the huge gash underneath. My wolf keens in my chest, anxious and worried, as we look over our intended mate. Her instinct is the same as mine: we want to soothe our mate, to use my skills to nurture, comfort, and heal him.

Once his arm is unwrapped, I carefully dab at the wound with a clean cloth. He winces, but still doesn’t respond.

“Quickly please, Miss,” Jason says gruffly. “The Alpha and the Luna will be here to see him shortly.”

I nod and reach out to touch the angry red skin. The second my fingers touch his arm, his eyes fly open.

“No,” he growls, low and commanding. “Don’t touch me!”

I pull back and look at him. “It’s me, Austin,” I plead. “I just want to help you.”

His eyes are bright and angry and I lower my head and take a deep breath. He’s hurt. He probably doesn’t mean it.

“You need to have your arm bandaged properly,” I begin slowly. “It will make your healing much faster. Please, just let me help you. I insist.”

I reach for him again, but he pulls his arm away, groaning in pain.

“Austin?” I plead, my eyes welling with tears.

“Get out!” he roars, clutching his arm to his chest and struggling to sit up. Blood oozes from the wounds. “Get out, right now!”

I stumble to my feet and take several steps back. The men in the room look between Austin and me, and I feel the tell-tale tendrils of shame start to rise up my neck.

“Here, you can—just wrap these on his arm,” I mumble, shoving the prepared bandages toward Jason. “Make sure to pull them tight and apply the salve. It will speed the process.”

No one says anything when I turn and flee the room, but I can feel the heat of

Austin's hostility and the stares of the men burning into my back as I run out of the bungalow toward the safety of my cottage.

Several of the packmates are gathered in the courtyard and they all start to shout when they see me.

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“Yelena, what’s happening?”

“Yelena, can you tell us who got hurt? Is it bad?”

“Yelena, are we at war?”

I slow to a walk and try to school my features. No matter how heartbroken and hurt I feel, people look up to me, and I can’t start a panic.

“I don’t have any information to share,” I say calmly. “But I’m sure Alpha Malaki will update everyone when he is ready.”

The gathered pack members murmur and talk among themselves, giving me the perfect chance to escape. I hurry up the steps to my porch, holding back my tears until I can get safely inside my house. Once back in the comfort of my home, I run toward the bathroom and lock myself in, leaning against the door.

“Why won’t you let me help you?” I whisper to myself.

The tears start to fall almost immediately. My heart hurts. More than anything else, I want to bring peace to Austin’s life. Our life.

It’s what I’ve always wanted. We were promised to each other as children, raised knowing that our destiny is intertwined. Fated by the Moon Goddess Herself.

Yet, he continues to push me away.

Every time I try to care for him, tend to him as a mate should, he refuses to allow me to do so.

Over the years, I've grown accustomed to his coldness. The distance. The rejection.

I've tried my hardest not to let it affect me. I've thrown myself into my work, becoming the best pack healer that I can be.

I want to be useful to him, to our pack. As the Alpha's heir, Austin's duties are numerous. He is in charge of security, reporting to his father. He is in training to one day ascend as the Alpha of our pack.

His responsibilities are overwhelming.

If I can find a way to prove myself as a mate, show him that I will be a worthy Luna one day, perhaps he will open up to me.

Because no matter how many times I tell myself it doesn't matter if he accepts me or not, or reassure myself that my place is by his side, now and always, I always hold out hope that someday he might see me as more than just a duty.

Moon Goddess, why have you mated me to someone who hates me?

I take a shuddering breath as I lean against the bathroom door, the icy sting of rejection burning through me. My hands tremble as I press them to my chest. It's one thing that he keeps me at arm's distance among the pack, but this time, his rejection feels more personal than usual.

To reject my touch and not even allow me to tend to him cuts deeper than anything else ever has before. All I want is to care for him. To love him. To show him that I am worthy by using the few gifts, I have to ease his suffering.

Instead, he'd rather be in pain than have me touch him.

Am I that repulsive to him? Am I so horrible as a mate that he'd rather endure a night of white-hot pain and suffering than my touch?

I squeeze my eyes shut and try to quell the fresh onslaught of tears.

You are the future Luna of the Nightwing Pack, Yelena. You must pull yourself together.

Even if Austin won't let me tend to him, there could be others from the same attack who need help

I cannot let my personal hurt feelings prevent me from realizing my duty to my pack.

With a deep breath, I reach one shaking hand up to smooth my hair and straighten my sweater. A peek in the mirror shows dark purple bags under my eyes and tear stains on my cheeks. I splash more water on my face and try to put on a brave face.

It's time to go to work.

Leaving Austin and not being the one to take care of him feels like torture. Every step I take away from him feels heavy, like stepping through mud. My heart aches and my instincts scream at me to go to him, to beg or do whatever it takes to be allowed to stay and be the one to tend to him. What if his injury had been worse? What if they hadn't got here in time? So many different scenarios could have resulted in Austin dying today.

My place is by his side...or at least, it's supposed to be.

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But he doesn't want me. He went so far as to order me not to touch him in front of his men. As much as it breaks my heart, I have no choice but to obey.

I force my feet to move in the direction of my front porch toward the courtyard, where more of his men are gathered.

"Do we have any more significant injuries?" I ask Vincent, one of Austin's closest friends.

Vincent looks at me kindly and directs me toward a small group of males in the corner, including one who is laid out on a stretcher.

"Can you please bring me three rolls of bandage and the healing tonic?" I ask the group of shifters standing next to the door.

One of them nods and hurries over to the Healer's bungalow. My eyes track him until he disappears from view. He'll be close to Austin. He could potentially check on him. The idea forces jealousy to burn through me, quick and hot.

One day, I will find a way to melt the ice around Austin's heart. But, until then, I will have to hold on to the hope that the Moon Goddess does not make mistakes.

It's past breakfast time by the time the last of the injured pack members have been treated and released back to their families. Dried blood stains my sleeves and my nose burns from the constant use of the healing tonic and antiseptic.

Exhausted, I trudge toward the Healer's bungalow to check on Austin. I know he

doesn't want me to touch him, but I have to know if he's okay and his injuries are on the mend. Jason is waiting outside the door.

"The Luna is with him now," he tells me gruffly. I nod my head respectfully.

"The salve is working. The bleeding has slowed, and the senior healers have checked him," he adds.

I'm grateful that he seems to know exactly what information I need. As much as I would love to see Austin myself, his time with the Luna is more important. Satisfied that his healing is well underway, I make my way back to my cottage. A few of the guards nod to me respectfully, but most ignore me. They take their cue from Austin as the leader of the guard and future Alpha. He ignores me, so they do too.

As a woman, I often feel like I'm invisible unless I'm needed. Usually, it doesn't bother me much. But the sting of Austin's rejection burns in my mind.

I simply don't know how to get through to him. I have tried so hard to melt even an inch of the impenetrable ice wall he has built around himself. But, since the moment we both accepted our destiny, he has viewed me with nothing but disdain, distrust, and even disgust.

Even thinking of that day brings tears to my eyes.

It was a bright, summery afternoon, and we had been playing in the high meadow in our shifted forms. His wolf and mine have always had been kindred spirits. They knew before we did, I think.

The Alpha and the Seer sat us both down and told us what the Moon Goddess had revealed to them.

I couldn't believe my ears.

I, Yelena Mycroft, was destined to be the Luna? Destined to be Austin's mate? Someone pinch me. It's like my wildest dreams just came true.

It was incredible. The flood of elation that swept through my body made me feel like I'd just run through the meadow at top speed. I felt like I was flying.

I believed, in that moment, that the Moon Goddess had truly blessed me. Not only would I have a Fated Mate, but I would have one that I could serve with happily. A partner that I could truly love.

A partner that I had already loved, for so many years, only from afar. To me, Austin represents everything that I've ever wanted. He's the whole package: ruggedly handsome, strong, intelligent, well-mannered, and loyal. But more than that, he's charming. The guy who always has time to play with the kids after supper or sit with the elders and visit. The first one to volunteer to help when one of our packmates needs it.

I imagined so many things during those early days. The beautiful, naive dreams of a lovesick pup.

I expected him to love me back. To return my feelings. I imagined us leading the pack, side-by-side, as a team. Dreamed of the day when we would start a family together.

Nothing could have prepared me for the depth of his coldness toward me. It was like his mood toward me changed overnight. In public, he stiffly acknowledged me as his future mate, but as soon as we were alone, he gave me nothing but icy glares and the silent treatment.

I became his intended mate and his enemy overnight. And I've spent the last eight years trying to fix it. I had hoped that we would have moved past this by now.

There have been a few times over the years where I've had hope. Little moments when his eyes would soften ever so slightly when he looked at me, or he would ask me about my day while passing me in the hall.

Those few precious moments are ones I keep locked away in my heart. Proof that there was a spark once—and maybe could be again.

But each time I try to rekindle it, he slams his guard up again, leaving me with nothing. We're almost never alone together. Physical contact between us is non-existent. Interaction is reserved for public appearances with the pack only, and even then, it's minimal. Polite indifference and respect as the future Luna—nothing more, nothing less.

How can two destined mates be so at odds with each other? What did I do to make him feel this way?

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I've been patient. Change takes time, I know that. But today's rejection was the harshest yet. I have no one else to turn to except the Moon Goddess herself.

I close my eyes and envision the full moon in all her glory. She's the silvery light that shines down on the woods and the meadow, bathing us in her radiance.

Moon Goddess, I don't know your reasons, but I trust in your wisdom. Austin is breaking my heart. Help me be what he needs, please.

I yawn and move toward my bed. There's enough time for a small nap if I hurry. But I can't stop thinking about him. His pain. I know the healers will have returned and checked on him. By all accounts, he will be fine. Yet, I feel compelled to help him and give him what I can to ease his discomfort.

My wolf won't allow us to rest while he's still suffering pain.

Chin up, shoulders back, I head over to the kitchen.

Austin needs me, whether he admits it or not.

My pantry has most of what I need, and I quickly whip up the healing salve. When we were kids, Austin used to love stealing oranges from the kitchen, so I quickly grab one and zest some of the peel into the salve.

The orange isn't essential, but I hope the smell is soothing to him.

Finally ready, I make my way to his room on the opposite side of the cottage. We live

together, but he always avoids me in the house. My hands tremble slightly as I knock. I didn't hear him come in, but his room has a door to the back patio, so it's possible he could have come in quietly.

I'm met with silence.

I knock again, louder. But, nothing. I'm left with a dilemma. If I step within his quarters, he will know I was there and in his private sanctuary.

But if I just leave...I look down at the salve in my hand. He may need it.

My heart tells me to enter, so I hesitantly turn the handle and open the door. The room is empty. I sigh with relief. He should still be resting in the healing room.

I carefully place the tin of salve on his dresser, along with a note about how to use it, before I hurry out, though he will know I have come.

However difficult the road ahead, I will stay strong. For I am the future Luna of this pack, and I will prove my worth.

Chapter Two

Yelena

Gray tendrils of fog swirl around the trees, giving the grounds an eerie feeling. A storm is coming in, I can feel it. My wolf is anxious—desperate to run before we get trapped inside for another long weekend.

I look outside again and try to decide what to do. If I shift now, I could maybe get a short run in before dark, but it would be cutting it close. Too close.

Austin recently decreed that it was no longer safe or prudent for me to run after dark alone. The incursions onto our territory from the Highland Pack have been increasing, and as the future Nightwing Luna, I could be considered a valuable target.

Besides, a part of me thought his singling me out like that was evidence that he cared. His concern for my safety was welcome. Would he protect me like this if he truly hated me?

Lately, I'm not so sure anymore. Last time I went, I had to go find the guards to run with me and I overheard them talking among themselves.

It took me several minutes of listening to them talk about "Austin's baggage" to realize that they were talking about me. I was mortified. Baggage? I'm supposed to be his future Luna. Not his obligation.

My heart was crushed. After that night, I've never asked to run after dark again. If I were to take a guard with me tonight, it would require them to miss the bonfire.

Another opportunity for them to hate me. Another thing to make me less than in their eyes.

When we moved in together six months ago, I thought it was going to be a fresh start for us. A chance to really get to know each other. After all, we've been intended for more than a third of our lives now. I had just turned twenty and Austin had just turned twenty-two. I thought we were ready. But so far, that hasn't been the case. I rarely see him, and when I do, our interactions feel stiff or formal.

I sigh and shake my head. The last thing I want to do is appear needy or be the cause of resentment in this pack. One day, I will be Luna and I need to show that I will be supportive of my mate and create harmony within this pack. Not cause trouble.

My wolf whines, and I push her down, promising her a run tomorrow during the day. It's disappointing, but this is the way it has to be.

If I'm being honest, a part of me is starting to resent the way I've had to give of myself, over and over, without any acknowledgment or reward. But I push those thoughts down too. No good can come of thinking like that.

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None.

I am safe. I have a purpose. An intended mate. Many women would kill to have that. I should be grateful.

Yet, the little voice in the back of my head pushes me, challenging me. Don't you deserve a mate who loves you with the same ferocity that you love him? Isn't that something you should aspire to, too?

I'm saved from the mental anguish of answering that question for myself when Barbara, one of the kitchen staff members, knocks on my front door, carrying a plate of food. It smells divine and my stomach growls in anticipation.

Her sweet little granddaughter, Hannah, follows right behind her, giving me a shy wave when she sees me. I've always loved children, and Hannah is a bright spot in my life. With her raven black hair and her bright blue eyes, she's striking. Her parents were killed in one of the battles we had with Highland a few years ago. Barbara took her in and, even with all the trauma the young girl has experienced, she's been thriving as part of the Nightwing Pack.

"Bonfire tonight, girlie. Make sure there are fresh bandages for the young bucks. You know how they like to show off for the girls," Barbara says, with an eye roll.

I laugh and gesture toward my small bag sitting next to the door. Burns is one of the few things that I can reliably heal faster than the shifter's natural abilities. I've spent several hours in the kitchen whipping up a tincture of herbs that can be sprayed directly on the burns to heal them.

“All set!” I tell her, tasting a bite of the chicken. It practically melts in my mouth. “Hopefully, we have fewer burns tonight. I don’t know why they think that fire won’t be hot each time we do this.”

Barbara barks out a laugh and busies herself with gathering my laundry. “When you get to be my age, you’ll realize that they never learn, girly. Especially when there are pretty girls to impress and a full moon.”

I take another bite of my food and think about that. I’ve been promised to Austin for most of my life. I’ve been off-limits to all the other young men our age for years.

What would it feel like, though, to have the young men competing for my attention? To sit with my friends on a log and watch as they goofed off and proved their bravery in hopes of winning me?

What would it be like to have friends? To have someone I can turn to, to be able to process all of my feelings with? I’ve never had that.

My mood sours and I push the food away, no longer hungry. Barbara’s sharp eyes don’t miss my movements and she comes to sit next to me.

Her kind, motherly face is twisted in concern when she gazes at me. “You’re too pale, Yelena. Are you eating enough? Resting? You need your strength.”

I nod, embarrassed by her concern, and pick at the food I was given. Honestly, I’m so used to being ignored that any positive attention feels foreign and uncomfortable. Like an itchy sweater over my skin—I can’t quite make it comfortable enough to work.

“Come on, ‘Lena, why don’t you come down to the fire tonight? You haven’t come to one in ages!” Hannah begs, pulling on my hand. “I’m going to dance tonight with

the big girls! Jessie said I could!”

I smile down at the younger girl and crouch to her level. Her big eyes are so kind. She's a sweetheart, one of the few pack members who regularly speaks to me as if I'm a person, not a title or a burden.

“I'll be there, sweetheart,” I reassure her, “Just in the back, making sure everyone is being safe. I'll still be able to see you dance, though.”

She nods thoughtfully. “Why don't you sit with Austin? He has a front-row seat!”

Barbara opens her mouth to save me, but I wave her off. “Austin is super important, isn't he?” I begin, giving Hannah a little smile. “He's got so many people that want to sit next to him and I get to live with him. It would be nicer for me to let others have that chance at the bonfire, right?”

She brightens and nods. “You're a good sharer!” she says happily. I give her a pained smile and don't reply.

The sweet girl has no idea.

“Let's let Yelena get ready, sweet girl,” Barbara says, hustling Hannah toward the door. “You'll get a chance to say hi to her tonight!”

I give them both a wave and then fall back onto my bed. My plate is only half eaten, but I can't stomach the idea of finishing it.

If the children are noticing that Austin and I never spend any time together, even at formal appearances, what are the adults saying? My cheeks burn with embarrassment. Maybe everyone in the pack knows he's repulsed by me. Maybe they spend their time talking about it.

A part of me wants to go find Austin, ask him if we can sit together tonight, but I already know what he'll say and my heart can't handle another rejection so soon after the last one.

I hug my worn flannel shirt to my body closer, fighting off the chill in the air. The weather has cleared up enough that it's actually a perfect fall night for a bonfire. The energy is high and even from a distance, I can feel my spirits rise a little bit. Playful shouts, laughter, and even the occasional joyful howl rip through the air.

These moments are what I love about pack life. When everyone gets together for the sole purpose of being together. Wolves are social creatures and we need our pack. It's part of our DNA.

"You could join them, you know. You have just as much right to be here as they do. Even more, given that you are our future Luna," a voice says softly to my right.

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I smile and turn to face Calliope, our pack Seer. She may be old enough to be my great-grandmother, but she's more spry than most in our pack and she's the closest thing to family that I have here. I take a few steps to my right and give her a quick hug.

"It's better if I stay back here," I murmur, watching as the young pups frolic. "Austin..."

I stop and remind myself to keep my decorum. Calliope serves as a surrogate grandmother to me, but she doesn't need to know how bad it is between Austin and I. If she's a Seer, she probably already knows.

"Austin has accepted you as his future Luna. If he is mistreating you, that should be brought up to Council or to our Alpha," she says firmly, turning my face to look me in the eye.

I meet her gaze head on and she grins. Few people make eye contact with her because she's a Seer. There are so many rumors about her abilities—even I don't know the full extent of them. But I do know that I'm not scared of her.

"There's no need to involve the Council, Callie," I whisper softly. "And certainly not Alpha Malaki. I'm just whining. I've felt more alone than usual of late."

Her expression softens and she pulls me into another hug. "Come, child. You can sit next to me instead."

I resist, but only for a moment. Arm and arm, I walk toward the logs that are set

around the fire. I can feel the stares as I get closer, the whisper of comments, but with Callie by my side, I try my best to rise above it.

“Hold your head up high, girl. You’re going to be the mate of their future leader,” Callie says under her breath, squeezing my arm encouragingly.

I try. I really do. But the weight of the stares feels suffocating. A rumble from the attendees makes me turn around, just in time to see Austin walk in, surrounded by his inner circle. It’s been three weeks since our disastrous encounter in the healing room, and I’ve barely seen him.

I look him over and smile softly when I see that he appears to be fully recovered.

Our eyes meet for a brief moment, and he glares at where Callie’s hand is on my arm.

“Austin,” she greets him, her voice booming through the gathered crowd. He blinks and then shifts his gaze to her.

“Seer.” He nods, making his way to his seat. We both watch him as he settles into the chair that is always reserved for him.

With his father, Alpha Malaki, and his mother, Luna Elizabeth, growing older, Austin often represents his family at these events. When he does, he sits in the Alpha’s chair.

But that’s not what my eyes are fixed on. Instead, I eye the smaller chair that is next to his.

The Luna’s chair.

Traditionally, when he is representing his father, I would also be expected to sit next to him at the event. But the first time I tried, he told me to wait in the back instead.

He explained that it would be more useful for the pack not to be distracted by me because we were only intended, but not yet mated. I felt the rejection in my soul.

Now, I watch as another male sits next to him, his head tipped close as he discusses whatever business he has with him. My chair is being used as a way to have an audience with Austin and it feels like a slap in the face.

Callie mutters something under her breath and drags me forward.

“Greet him,” she hisses at me under her breath, “And hold your head up high while you do it.”

I stare at her in horror. Making a scene at a public event is the exact opposite of what I would want to do or what Austin would want me to do.

But we’re already standing awkwardly in front of him and if we don’t say something, people are going to notice. I take a deep breath and Callie gives me a little shove, forcing me to stumble. Austin looks at me with narrow eyes.

“Hi, Austin,” I say softly, “Happy Bonfire.”

He stares at me, his silver eyes piercing right through me as he purses his lips. The silence between us stretches on and I hear the tell-tale whispers start up among my packmates.

Embarrassment starts to rise in my cheeks. This is humiliating. After a very long minute, Austin finally nods his head at me.

“Happy Bonfire, Yelena,” he says, simply, turning away from me to continue his conversation.

It's a benign greeting, but he delivered it so coldly that it feels like I was slapped. I turn to run away but Callie is blocking my exit.

“Dry those tears, love, we're not done here,” she says, stepping around me to face Austin head on.

“Austin,” she calls out, her loud voice drawing the attention of our pack again. I cringe as the spotlight extends to me, once again. Whatever Callie has planned, I'm know I'm going to hate it.

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“I know I speak for the whole pack when I say the Moon Goddess has blessed you with such a beautiful, kind, and worthy intended mate,” she continues. My face flames red and I want to die. Austin looks over at me again, this time his expression is unreadable.

“For this Full Moon bonfire, perhaps you would grace us all with a dance, just you and your intended Luna, to welcome in the Moon Goddess on this night?”

You could hear a pin drop around the fire while everyone stares at us. The snap and crackle of the flames sounds like gunshots.

Austin studies me and then turns to Callie with a smile. It’s one of his fake ones, specifically the one he uses when he’s extremely annoyed.

My heart sinks like a stone.

“The Moon Goddess has blessed all of the Nightwing Pack, indeed,” he says, causing the packmates around us to howl in excitement. “We honor Her every time we dance around this fire. Alas, as I’m sure my lovely intended will tell you, my dancing is less of an honor and more of a hindrance, so I must honor the Moon Goddess in a different way.”

Quiet laughter sounds around the bonfire as I feel the pit in my stomach grow even deeper, somehow.

“But, please, don’t let that stop you all from dancing. This is our night. Let’s celebrate!” he says before sitting down and turning to the crowd at his side. A clear

dismissal.

The pack responds with a roar and the music starts up as everyone starts to dance. Callie tucks under her breath, leading me over to the side where her spot is.

I follow her, but I'm numb. I can't breathe. All I want to do is run away.

Rejected. Again. This time, in front of the entire pack.

I've never felt more alone in my life. I thought, before tonight, that I understood what it meant to be lonely. Most of my friends have all drifted away, jealous or intimidated by my future role. My mother is gone, and my father is living far away in the city, and now my mate avoids me. I've come to terms with that as best I can, but it's hard.

This is a new low. I want to curl up in a little ball and cry. Hannah comes running over, grabbing my hand and pulling me over to where Barbara and some of the other packmates are seated. They greet me kindly, but I can see the questions in their eyes.

The strength of a pack is often dependent on the mated Alpha pair. If Austin and I can't even fake it during our engagement, that puts the pack in jeopardy. People will think that we're breakable.

Why, Moon Goddess, why have you cursed me like this?

Chapter Three

Austin

I can't concentrate on a word Vincent says as he tells me about the latest spy we've found on our territory. I can't stop tracking Yelena's movements around the bonfire. It's the curse of Fated Mates. No matter how hard I try, I can't stop stealing glances

at her.

She looks beautiful tonight. Her black hair is pulled back in a simple braid and she's dressed casually in just jeans and a pink flannel shirt. It's an effortless kind of natural beauty that she's embodied ever since we were kids. An intrusive thought flashes into my mind as I watch her move.

What would her body feel like, pressed up against mine? What would she taste like?

I shudder and shake my head, scowling at the world around me. It does me no good to think like that.

I look up again and see her staring at me, her face stricken. She must have seen my scowl and assumed that it was about her.

If I were a better man, I'd reassure her. Tell her that she did nothing wrong. But, instead, I scowl again and she visibly recoils.

I'm the worst kind of asshole for taking some joy in it. It's not Yelena's fault that she represents everything I hate about my life and it's not her fault that I'm drawn to her against my will.

I wish I could hate her. It would certainly make things easier. But she's so good. It's hard to hate someone who is naturally kind. Compassionate. Loyal.

I resent it and her in many ways. If I can't fight Fate, I can at least delay it, which is why she's been claimed as my mate in name only.

One of the kitchen assistants hands me an ice-cold bottle of beer and I take it, drinking deeply. My eyes are still fixed on my skittish mate, watching her as she moves quietly throughout the party. If Calliope weren't here causing a ruckus, she'd

probably already be hidden away.

Yelena's shoulders are already so tense and her smile is brittle. She's deeply uncomfortable in these kinds of situations, but she's doing a good job of hiding it.

Doing her duty, as always.

She smiles at the few people who greet her and pays special attention to one of the children who approaches her. It's the first time I have seen one of her genuine smiles come out and it makes my heart skip a beat and a pang of jealousy rise in my chest. I frown and try to push those feelings away.

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But this is what our life has dealt us. We're promised to each other. Fated.

Our choices have been made for us. By our parents, the universe, the pack, hell, even the Moon Goddess herself.

I've come to terms with her presence in my life by accepting her as an unfortunate inconvenience. A physical representation of not only my status as Alpha-heir but the reality that my freedom has been stolen by Fate. She is my responsibility, as are all of my pack members, but I can't allow her to be more.

I purposefully look away and try to concentrate on my friend next to me.

"I think we should send a scouting party out to the east just to make sure that border is locked up," Vincent continues, blissfully unaware of my inattention.

I nod. "Do it."

These are the kinds of concerns I should be focusing on. Our border, the safety of our pack, the intelligence that keeps coming in about our rivals...not, my mate.

He tries to add something else, but I brush him aside. My eyes are glued across the fire to where Yelena is being dragged out onto the dance floor by a small group of children and some of our warriors. Her lithe body moves side to side, in time with the music as the pups dance around her. She looks ethereal, the way she throws her head back and howls at the moon with the kids is...stunning.

I feel a small tendril of shame start in my core. I've treated her like shit, and yet she

continues to do her duty to me and our pack, with kindness, respect, and grace. It would be way easier if she were cranky, or obstinate, or needy...

But she's not. She's accepted every decree that I've given her, even when I know she hates it. She has served our pack well.

She will be the perfect Luna. Submissive, selfless, and obedient.

I kick a pebble across the grass in frustration. Yelena may be the perfect Luna on paper, but at the end of the day, the idea of trading my freedom for a lifetime of living with someone so meek and bland makes me want to punch something. How could she be okay with just signing her life away because Fate told her to? Why doesn't she ever push back?

I grumble when my view of her is blocked by more couples joining the dance party. I want to keep watching her, but if I stare too long, I'll attract attention. I've done well to keep a very visible divide between us. If that changes, the entire pack will start to gossip.

It's not fair to me and it's not fair to her. Better to leave things as they are.

"You should ask her to dance, Austin," Vincent says, looking at where my attention lies. "She's your mate, not your enemy."

I scowl at him and shrug. "I don't dance."

Vincent smirks at me. "You're quite hard on her, you know. There are better ways to be hard for your mate. Remember that, my friend."

I roll my eyes and take a deep breath to keep from snapping at him. As my most trusted advisor and one of my closest friends, Vincent always knows which buttons to

push.

He claps me on my shoulder and moves toward the dance area where his own beautiful mate, Giana, is waiting for him. They are well matched and I'm happy for them. They will bring much strength to our pack through their family ties.

Vincent and Giana twirl effortlessly around the fire, lost in their own little world.

They are one of the lucky few who fell in love first and then Fate confirmed their bond and destiny. I wish that had happened for Yelena and I. Perhaps it would be easier for me to accept if I had chosen her first before Fate chose her for me. I drain my beer bottle and another person hurries over to replace it.

Yelena is still dancing, her willowy frame bending and swaying to the music. I go to turn away, lost in my thoughts, when I see him approach her. Suddenly, there's nothing else going on at this party more important than watching this interaction.

His name is Jimmy, and he's one of our loners, pack-less wolves who stay with us for a time in exchange for their mercenary services.

And she is mine.

Most of our packmates know better than to approach Yelena to dance. Or, if they do, it's always in a group. Always.

But this asshole has swaggered up to her as if she's any other available female. He's smiling at her, laughing with her.

Rage flows through me when he offers her his hand and gestures toward the music. I go to turn away, causing the packmates around me to look around.

I don't care what they do. All I care about is Yelena and whatshedoes.

She pauses and looks uncertain, clearly uncomfortable with the rogue wolf's advances. Good girl.

Jimmy is undeterred and I grit my teeth. She looks over toward where I am, clearly looking to see my reaction, and I school my face, giving her only my normal stony glare.

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The moon is high in the sky, casting a silvery glow over the clearing and I can see her face clearly. She looks...lost. But he? He has a knowing smile playing across his lips.

He knows who she is. He knows what he's doing.

I take a step toward them before turning to converse with a startled group of wolves.

Out of the corner of my eye, I watch as Yelena and Jimmy walk together toward the fire. He starts to dance. She's careful to keep a space between them, as befitting her station.

I try to relax, but my jealousy is riding me hard. I'm relieved that she doesn't touch him, but she's still next to him, and that's a problem.

My wolf demands that I move closer, so I make my way through the throngs of people.

The music changes to an upbeat song and I watch as she graces him with a smile. The bastard. They keep dancing and I slowly start to lose control over my feelings.

I scan the area for Vincent, hoping he can be the voice of reason before I do something rash like punch Jimmy in the fucking face.

She is my responsibility but so is my entire pack. I cannot let this situation make a fool of me.

My pep talk does nothing to calm my instincts. I'm still hyper-aware of everything

she does.Damn it.

The next time I look over, I see her walking away from him. My wolf starts to calm and I feel peace start to flow through me again.

As I start to turn my back, something catches my eye. A tree branch jutting out of the flames. It's as if I'm watching a slow-motion replay of a live sporting event. She stumbles, and her arms flail in an attempt to regain balance...but she's already tumbling down.

I rush toward her, but not before he gets there first. His hands circle her tiny waist, catching her before she collapses and, for one tiny second, holding her close.

Instantly, my hackles rise and I feel the growl start deep in my throat.Mine.

My bark startles the rest of the surrounding pack and they move out of my way, their chatter dropping to a low hum.

“Jimmy!” I roar, effectively drawing the eyes of every single person here.

He startles at my roar and freezes, his hands still around her waist.

I can't look away. I'm utterly fixated on where his hands touch her. My wolf growls again as murderous thoughts crowd my mind.

He's touched my mate. His hands are on her. The rogue wolf must go.

As quickly as he touches her, he lets go, and she loses her balance, crumpling to the ground in a heap.

She looks up at me, her cheeks flushed and her eyes wide with terror.

“Austin,” she whispers.

I ignore her and focus on Jimmy. He must pay for his disrespect.

“Get out,” I order, glaring at him. “Your time at this Bonfire has ended, rogue.”

Jimmy opens his mouth as if to say something but looks back at me and decides against it. Wise.

Instead, he shuffles off toward the woods, waiting until he’s safely far enough away to shift.

I can’t look away until I’m sure his russet wolf is far away from here.

When I look down, I see that several of the women, including Calliope, have helped Yelena up. Shame and guilt weigh heavily on my chest yet again, threatening to suffocate me.

“Are you hurt?” I bark, making her flinch again. Damn it.

She shakes her head slowly and backs away from me, dusting off her jeans as she does. Vincent appears at my side, his face the picture of concern...and confusion.

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I'm acting out of character. I know it. He knows it. The pack knows it, and, worst of all, Yelena knows it too. I can feel her questioning gaze burning into the side of my face, but I refuse to acknowledge it.

The constant murmur of my pack, whispering all around me, tells me that what I've dreaded has already happened; this scene will be the main discussion amongst them for days.

"You should go in, get some rest," I tell her gruffly, turning away to stalk back toward the party. Yet, the closer I get, the more I realize that I don't want to be here anymore. The bonfire has lost all appeal.

The only thing that appeals to me right now is blood...and since I can't have that, a run.

"Vincent, Chris—on me," I yell, shifting easily into my midnight-black wolf. I sprint toward the tree line, the familiar yips and howls of my men following close behind.

At least as a wolf, everything feels clearer. Life makes more sense. If only for a little while.

Chapter Four

Yelena

The cottage is too quiet. I sit in my favorite chair and try to read my book, but my heart isn't in it. I have the whole cottage to myself for a change and I know I should

take advantage of the peace and quiet, but my mind is consumed with replaying the night of the Bonfire over and over again.

Austin's actions have left me feeling hurt, humiliated, and bewildered. I still can't believe he banished Jimmy from the party for simply dancing with me. It's all so confusing. It was a harmless dance at a pack event. There was no need for him to make a scene and assert his dominance in that way. Singling me out in front of everyone...my cheeks burn just thinking about it.

As an Alpha, I know Austin is naturally prone to be more protective and possessive, especially over their mates or intended-mates, but Austin has never made me feel like I can't even interact with my pack. If anything, he goes out of his way to ignore me and leaves me to my own devices far too often.

I want to talk to him about it. Maybe use this incident to break the ice between us. Yet, when I woke up the morning after the Bonfire, it was to an empty house and a simple text.

Gone on business with Father. Be back later this week.

I've heard nothing since.

As far as texts between couples go, it's laughably brief. I honestly wouldn't be surprised if he sent the same thing to his barber or the captain of his guard. Hurt and confusion swirl inside me and suddenly, the silence in the cottage feels stifling, pressing down on me like a weight I can't shake off.

I set my book down with a frustrated sigh and rub my exhausted eyes. Until he gets back, there will be no fixing this.

Rising from my chair, I decide to take a walk outside to clear my head. The fresh air

and company of my packmates might do me good. Anything is better than just sitting in my cottage and replaying that night in my head, over and over again.

The wind brushes against my skin, carrying with it the faint scent of rain and pine. It's comforting.

Hannah waves at me from the porch of the laundry center and I head her way.

"Yelena," she beams, jumping off the step to run and give me a hug. I smile at her and hug the young girl back.

"Hannah! How are you today, sweet girl?" I ask.

She twirls in place, and I notice she has an enormous candy in her hand.

"Good. Austin gave me a lollipop!"

My smile is brittle, and I take a deep breath before crouching down to her level. "When did Austin give you that?" I ask carefully.

She twirls again, laughing as her skirts fly out in a bell shape.

"This morning! He said he got it for me on his trip!"

My heart starts to pound and I pull out my phone to check my texts, hoping that Austin had sent me a note telling me he was home.

Nothing.

"How kind of him," I smile at Hannah, "If he's home from his trip now, I better go find him!"

Hannah nods happily and returns to playing on the porch, her large lollipop in hand.

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My hands are shaking as I make my way slowly across the courtyard toward our cottage. I'm at a breaking point. Normally, Austin being gone is just part of the rhythm of our daily life, but this time I feel it more intensely.

I've put my own feelings on the back burner for years now in an effort to cater to him. But as much as I've tried, I can't seem to brush these feelings of anger, humiliation, and hurt away as easily as I have in the past.

If I'm being truly honest with myself, I'm furious with Austin and fed up with his behavior.

I've tried everything I can think of to convince myself to let it go and I can't. It's not fair, the way Austin ignores me for days at a time, openly avoids interacting with me whenever we're in public, and is generally hostile. But to become angry with me because one of our packmates spoke to me? To skate by with only the most basic level of consideration?

This has to stop.

"I just need to tell him how I feel, clear the air," I mutter to myself as I stomp across my porch and wrench open the door. "This is my pack too, and I deserve to be able to talk to whomever I want."

Austin's boots are sitting just inside the door and the sight of them makes me relieved and frustrated. I am so glad he's home. No matter how frustrated I might be, my wolf lights up when he's around. I crave his presence in a way that can only be explained through our Fated bond. Being separated from him for too long is a struggle. Yet,

being close to him is often painful too.

He's back. Here we go.

"Austin?" I call out, making my way through the living room. He doesn't answer, but I don't expect him to. There's water running in the kitchen, so I make my way there. Confrontation makes me nervous under ideal circumstances, and this is far from ideal.

Just say your piece. It will be okay. I try to steel myself, but when I step into the kitchen, I'm distracted by the sight of him.

He's standing by the sink, his back to me. Even though I'm frustrated with him, his presence makes my heart skip a beat. He's so ruggedly handsome. His short black hair is longer than normal, and I wish I could run my hands through it. My fingers itch to touch him, to massage away the tension I can see in his broad shoulders. As wolf shifters, we're tactile creatures. Austin is my intended-mate, and under normal circumstances, I would be able to touch him often.

Our circumstances are far from normal and even though I crave him, I know I can't indulge those desires. He would never allow it. His role in our pack requires him to be strong for everyone else all the time, and he does it without complaint. It's one of the things I adore most about him. He gives himself so willingly to our pack. I know, when the time arrives, he will be an excellent Alpha.

"Welcome home," I call out softly. "I'm glad you're back." I take a hesitant step forward, hoping for some connection, some sign that he might be glad to see me too.

He visibly stiffens at the sound of my voice. My heart sinks but I try to force myself to stay positive.

When he finally turns around, I'm shocked by how tired he looks. There are purple bags under his eyes and a heaviness about him that tugs at my heartstrings. The sight of his broad shoulders slumped in exhaustion makes my anger start to waver and my empathy hits me. As much as I want—and need—answers for the way he treated me, the need to comfort him in his time of need is stronger. If he would welcome it, I would hold him, but I know better than to suggest it.

“Thanks,” he says, finally, his voice heavy with fatigue.

The silence between us feels awkward, and it makes me sad. I wish I knew what to say to make him feel better or to help him understand that I want to help.

Moon Goddess, give me the right words to help him. I pray silently.

“Why don't you go shower, and I'll cook you dinner. Give you a chance to relax a little bit,” I offer gently, my voice almost pleading.

He looks up but shakes his head at me. “No. That's not necessary.”

He stalks out of the kitchen toward his room and bathroom without another word, leaving me feeling even more confused. I bite my lip, watching him go, my heart aching with the distance between us.

When I hear the water turn on for his shower, I immediately get to work. Austin may have said that making food wasn't necessary, but I want to ease some of his burden, so I pull out some pasta, salmon, and vegetables, and start cooking. My hands work on autopilot as I prepare the food, but my mind lingers on Austin.

The water runs in the shower for almost thirty minutes and the insidious little voice in my head asks if it's because Austin is purposefully trying to avoid me. Again. Even though the thought stings, I push it aside and try to focus on the task at hand.

Carefully, I dish him up a plate and make my way down the hallway toward his room. I put an ear to the door and hear the water still running, so I carefully creep inside and place the plate on his desk. My heart pounds in my chest, a mixture of hope and nervousness.

I hope this gesture will make him smile and put him in a good mood so we can discuss my concerns later. But, rather than wait to see his reaction, I decided to give him space. I quietly creep back out and shut the door behind me, pausing for a moment to wish things were different. I make my way back to my room and pick up my book to try and distract myself from the ache in my chest.

The sun almost blinds me as I sit up, squinting at my open curtains. It's early—too early to be awake, but I've never been the kind of person who can go back to sleep after I've been woken up. Instead, I swing my legs out of bed and make my way out to the kitchen. Might as well get breakfast going.

The cottage is quiet, and I am careful not to make too much noise as I prepare our meal. With how tired Austin looked last night, I imagine he could do with a hearty breakfast. I smile to myself and imagine his surprise when he comes out of his room and sees all his favorites this morning.

I shuffle over to the coffee maker but stop short when I see a familiar plate on the counter. Empty.

I hurry over to grab it, noting the sauce stains and the little bit of vegetables still stuck to it. Austin ate the dinner I made!

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A small spark of joy makes its way into my heart as I hold the plate. I don't want to overthink this, but it feels like a tiny step forward.

Maybe what Callie always says is true. The way to a male's heart is through his stomach.

If that's the case, I will cook for him as much as possible. Today could be the start of something new for us.

I crack eggs for the omelets and pop a couple of pieces of bread in the toaster before rummaging through the fridge.

It feels good to have a goal this morning, and I throw myself into my cooking.

Of all the different versions of Austin that I get to see, one of my favorites is in the early morning when he stumbles down the hallway in just his sweats, still rubbing the sleep from his eyes. Sometimes, if I'm lucky, he forgets the tension between us for a brief second, and I get a sleepy smile or a good morning greeting. Every once in a while, we get to share a companionable silence over our morning cups of coffee, each lost to our own thoughts.

I live for those moments. They make me feel like there's hope that our relationship will grow.

The toaster pops, and I hurry to butter both sides of the bread, just the way he likes it. The omelet slides easily from the pan to the plate, and I cut some tomatoes for garnish.

Perfect.

I'm practically bouncing with excitement for him to come and see what I've made him. I pour myself a cup of coffee and get started on loading the dishes in the dishwasher.

As I load the last cup, I look out the kitchen window and freeze, my heart dropping.

Austin's motorcycle is missing from his normal parking spot. Drying my hands, I hurry over to the table by the front door.

His boots are gone too.

He must have left at the crack of dawn.

The thought dashes my mood to pieces, and I trudge back to the kitchen. Austin's perfect plate is still waiting on the kitchen table.

I sit down heavily and sip at my coffee as I try to fight back tears.

At least he ate my dinner last night. That has to mean something. Right?

Chapter Five

Yelena

"And so, as we conclude these trials, we would like to welcome you as fully fledged members of the Nightwing Pack. May you find strength and belonging in our midst, and may your bond with your wolf deepen with each passing day," Alpha Malaki's voice booms through the forest clearing. The moon is shining high in the sky, bathing us all in her blessed light and adding an air of mysticism to the ancient ceremony.

Our pack is growing, evidence that the Moon Goddess has truly smiled down on us.

We've gained three new members today, and it's a truly joyous occasion. Two of the members have already found their Fated Mates within the Nightwing Pack. The addition of their Fated bonds to our numbers only strengthens our pack. The other new member is a rogue who has fought with us for the last year. His strength, cunning, and loyalty will be an asset to our warriors as we continue to defend our land against incursions from rivals like the Highland Pack.

As soon as Alpha Malaki steps down from the podium, the whole pack erupts into cheers and howls, rushing to welcome our new packmates. I watch as the new pack members are enveloped in hugs and cheers. They all stand tall and proud in the center of the clearing, surrounded by our pack.

Out of habit, I scan the crowd and locate Austin easily. He is laughing and smiling and it makes me smile too. I love seeing him like this, happy and carefree. I crane my neck to see who he's with and my heart falls when I see that it's one of the pretty young females that has made him laugh.

He'll talk to new packmates, old packmates, even the kids, but he won't talk to me.

A tendril of jealousy winds its way through me, making me clench my fists and stifle back a growl. Whether he wants it to be or not, we're Fated, which means he's mine. I don't like seeing him with other females, even though I know it's part of his job to talk to everyone in the pack.

The progress I had hoped we achieved with my small dinner win last week is long gone. Austin has been cold and distant every day since. I've even taken to making his favorite breakfast pastries every afternoon and leaving them out for him each morning, but he's not said a single word about it.

It's made my inner turmoil reach a fever pitch. I've been torn between continuing to tolerate his icy demeanor and confronting him in an effort to try and understand why he subjects me to such disregard.

At this point, I want a reason. I need one. His mood swings are emotionally exhausting, and I don't know how much longer I can keep on doing this.

"Whatever you're planning, don't do it," Callie says, coming up behind me. Her unexpected presence makes me stumble.

"Why? Did you have a vision?" I ask her anxiously.

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“Sweetheart, I don’t need a vision to know that you are up to something,” Callie says seriously. I shift my weight on my toes and avoid her gaze.

I’m saved from having to answer that when another pack mate comes rushing up to drag Callie away to their table.

“I’m serious, Yelena. Don’t do it,” she warns, looking back at me over her shoulder.

Technically, the only thing I am planning to do tonight is eat a ton of tacos so I disregard her advice with an eye roll and head over to the small eating area we’ve set up.

Most of the pack is still busy welcoming in the new members so I get my pick of tables. I choose one that has an excellent view of the whole clearing. Austin is still talking to the new pack members, so I decide to try ignoring him the way he’s been ignoring me. It’s harder than it looks. We’re like two sides of a magnet, and he draws my attention anytime he’s in the vicinity, no matter how hard I try to avoid it.

“Do you mind if I join you?” a familiar voice asks, forcing me to look up from my plate.

I look up and stare directly into the eyes of Jimmy, the wolf from the Bonfire.

“I’m not here for anything other than wanting to extend my deepest apologies for disrespecting you the way I did that night,” he says, quietly. “Please, forgive me.”

He seems sincere, and I can count on one hand the number of apologies I’ve ever

received like this. It feels nice.

“Have a seat, Jimmy,” I invite, gesturing toward the seat in front of me.

Jimmy beams and quickly joins my table. Two plates of tacos are brought out to us, and we make small talk. I finally start to feel relaxed. The more I talk to Jimmy, the more I laugh. He’s funny and seems to possess an innate ability to set me at ease. I’m surprised when I realize that I genuinely enjoy his company. I’m careful to keep it appropriate. The entire pack is here, after all.

But I can’t remember the last time I’ve been able to let my guard down like this. If things were different, I would absolutely be his friend.

Yet, as much as I’m enjoying myself with Jimmy, Austin is never far from my mind. I’ve glanced over at him multiple times throughout the conversation and each time, I see him with a frown on his face. He’s still talking to our packmates, and it makes me wonder what they told him to make his mood sour so quickly.

The festivities continue around us as the whole pack celebrates our new members. Soon, the bonfire is crackling and popping, casting flickering shadows across the clearing. The steady thump of music fills the air, blending with the sounds of laughter and howls.

Jimmy remains a perfect gentleman, and it’s allowing me to actually enjoy a pack event for the first time in ages.

“Do you want anything more to drink while I’m up?” I ask Jimmy as I drain the last dregs of my sparkling water. He nods and I notice he’s drinking beer.

I stand and brush off my jeans before going back toward the cooler to hunt down some drinks. Whispers from my packmates follow me as I move through the crowd,

making me feel uneasy. I bite my lip and wonder if I've crossed a line by sitting with Jimmy.

We've done nothing untoward but, perhaps I've somehow made a mistake by being friendly with him.

By the time I return, a bottle of water in one hand and a bottle of beer in the other, my anxiety is in full swing. I hand Jimmy the beer, and he cracks it open with a smile.

"You're a beautiful angel," he says after taking a giant gulp of his beer. I flush and look away, uncomfortable with the praise. I don't want to hear any compliments like that from Jimmy. There's only one person I want calling me that.

Movement catches the corner of my eye, and I notice that Austin has moved closer to our table. His chiseled face is stony, and nerves tingle up my spine. I edge my chair away from the table, putting some additional space between Jimmy and I. The last thing I want is for Austin to somehow get the wrong idea.

"Oh, man, I love this song," Jimmy proclaims, getting up to sway with the music. I give him a tight smile. The feelings of camaraderie and friendship have fled, leaving me anxious.

"C'mon! You should dance!" Jimmy continues, stumbling over his feet to come stand next to me.

His breath smells like old beer, and I wrinkle my nose. He's singing loudly and off-key, drawing the attention of our packmates to us.

I cringe under their scrutiny.

"Maybe we should just sit down," I urge him, reaching out to grab his arm. My intent

was to lead him to our table, but he loses his balance and flings his arm around my shoulders to catch himself. I find myself squished up against him, my face buried in his jacket.

Everything about him is wrong and I start to panic. I don't want his hands or his scent on me. I shove away from him and take a large step backward.

"I need to go," I tell him shortly.

I can feel the burn of many eyes on me, and I look up. Austin is staring at us and he looks... stricken.

My heart clenches.

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“Oh, no,” I whisper, looking between him and Jimmy.

If the last Bonfire was an indicator of how he would react, I know I need to brace myself for his fury.

“You need to get out of here. Go sober up,” I hiss at Jimmy, but he ignores me.

Austin gives me another dark look before turning around and walking into the woods, leaving the party, and me, behind.

I’m relieved that he doesn’t make a scene in front of the pack this time. I want to hurry after him, tell him that it was just a misunderstanding, but my feet feel glued to the ground. I was just talking to a pack member, and Jimmy touching me was an accident.

Callie’s warning flashes in my mind again and my heart sinks. How do I fix this?

Chapter Six

Yelena

It’s well after midnight before I make my way back home. I’ve been walking around for hours, even shifting at one point, in order to assuage the pain in my heart. Not even my wolf form can make me feel better tonight.

I’m tired, both from the day and from the emotional anguish of carrying my feelings. I know Austin is likely to be angry with me, but I can’t hide from it any longer.

Trudging up my front steps, I sigh heavily and prepare myself for the worst.

At least if he yells, he will finally be talking to me, I think bitterly to myself.

My hand stills on the doorknob when I hear a strange, discordant noise coming from inside our cottage. It sounds like a child banging away on a piano. I twist the knob and step inside, confused.

Inside, the noise is louder.

“Austin, I’m home,” I call out, slipping off my shoes and following the noise toward our living room.

The house is dark, except for the hall light that spills out into the living room. I can just make out the shape of Austin sitting in the shadows at the piano bench, his shoulders hunched over as he furiously bangs out notes.

“Look who finally decided to come home,” he snarls, stopping his playing long enough to take a long swig from a bottle before dropping it on the floor with a crash. It’s empty, and it rolls toward the couch. I cringe.

“Austin, I...” I begin, but he cuts me off with more off-key piano playing. The noise makes my head hurt and I feel my temper spike. This is childish.

“Are you going to talk to me, or are you going to act like a child and throw a fit?” I ask, crossing my arms in front of my chest.

The harshness of my words surprises both of us, and he stops playing and turns to look at me. I can count on one hand the number of times I’ve spoken to him like this, but I can’t bring myself to take it back.

Instead, I summon my courage and flip on the light, making him wince, before entering our living room and flopping down on the couch.

“I would have thought you’d be with your special friend,” he snarls, reaching for another bottle of beer on the floor. “Glad to see you made it home.” His face is red, and I can tell he’s been drinking heavily.

Great. Just great.

I stare at him incredulously. Is he being serious right now? A laugh escapes me, and I shake my head. Unbelievable.

“I’m allowed to have friends, Austin,” I say slowly, “I’m lonely, not that you care.”

He scoffs and takes another long drink.

“Jimmy isn’t your friend,” he says flatly. “He wants more than that. I can tell. Or are you blind to the way he looks at you? The way everyone looks at you?”

My heart starts to pound in time with the headache forming behind my eyes. The double standard he has is beyond frustrating and I resent what he’s implying.

“So, what you’re saying is, I’m not allowed to sit with Jimmy, my friend, but you are allowed to have all the pack females hanging around you all the time and I’m supposed to just smile and ignore it?” I snap back. “That’s completely unfair, and you know it.”

He glares at me. On a different night, I might have backed down or tried to make amends, but I just don’t have it in me this evening. Instead, I glared at him back. To my surprise, he’s the first one to look away.

“You’re right. But life isn’t fair, Yelena,” he says quietly. “You should be well aware of that by now.”

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I roll my eyes and sit up, hugging my knees to my chest. “Austin,” I begin, pinching the bridge of my nose in irritation. It feels like we’re going in circles. He is absolutely maddening.

“No,” he stops me, lifting his eyes to meet mine. I’m shocked by the pain and anger that I see swirling in his silvery depths. “Don’t make excuses! What we have, what we are destined for, is unfair. It’s unfair to me and it’s unfair to you. I acknowledge that, but I’ll be damned if I let you be seen with other males in this pack—especially males like Jimmy!”

“He’s just my friend!” I shout, my voice cracking as I hug my knees even tighter. “Do you think he’s the one I want? Do you think he’s the one that I lay awake at night thinking about? No! That’s you, you insufferable asshole. I don’t want anyone but you. You’re my intended-mate!”

He stares at me like I just slapped him but, once unleashed, my anger can’t be undone.

“You’re it for me, Austin. I believe in the wisdom of the Moon Goddess. I know that our Fates are intertwined and, unlike you, that future excites me. I want to be with you! I want to share our life and help you carry the burdens of your destiny too. But you won’t let me. You barely even acknowledge that I exist. You want to sit there and tell me that you think it looks bad to the rest of the pack that I have a male friend? How about how it looks that you treat your intended mate as an afterthought? That the future Luna of this pack is a burden that you don’t want!”

The ferociousness of my anger surprises me and I’m breathing heavily by the time

I'm finished.

Austin is staring at me like I've grown two heads.

He stands up abruptly, knocking over the piano bench in his haste. The room is silent except for our heavy breathing. The tension between us is thick enough to cut with a knife. His eyes bore into mine, but I hold his gaze, unflinching.

After what feels like an eternity, Austin takes a single step closer to me. I exhale shakily, and his expression softens slightly, the anger giving way to a mix of emotions that I can't quite decipher. Without a word, he reaches out a hand and gently lifts my chin, forcing me to look into his eyes. His touch is so unexpected that I freeze.

"I never wanted you to feel like a burden, Yelena," he whispers huskily. If I didn't know better, I'd say his voice was laced with regret. I can smell the alcohol on his breath but, as his thumb gently strokes my cheek, I lean into him. A part of me just wants to soak up the mixture of relief and longing that swirls within me. For the first time in forever, there's a feeling of hope that flickers deep in my chest.

"I know I haven't been who you deserve, but it's not you. You are everything a good Luna should be. It's..." He swallows hard, and I hold my breath, hanging on to his every word.

He falls silent and his grip on my chin tightens. I furrow my brow in confusion, my anger slowly dissipating.

"What is it, Austin?" I whisper, almost afraid of the answer.

He hesitates for a long moment before speaking again.

“It’s me. I’m angry that we never had the choice,” he admits, his eyes locking onto mine with a vulnerability I’ve never seen before. “And I’m afraid that I’m going to end up failing you or, worse, losing control and hurting you.”

I reach up and rest my hand over his, trapping his warmth to my cheek. My touch causes him to flinch, but I hold his gaze. As I rub my hand over his, he relaxes, allowing me to touch him. When he closes his eyes briefly, I can almost imagine him savoring the connection between us and it emboldens me.

I know it’s probably the alcohol in his system, but I’ve dreamed of a moment like this—when he would finally come to me and share with me. Confide in me like a true mate.

“We’re in this together, remember?” I whisper to him softly, hoping to convey the depths of my feelings for him through my touch and my words.

He opens his eyes slowly and then nods. He releases his hold on my cheek, and I immediately miss his warmth.

“Play for me?” he asks

I allow him to pull me up from the couch and lead me over to the piano. Carefully, he sets the bench upright and waits until I slide across it before he joins me.

“What do you want me to play?” I ask nervously.

He shrugs and closes his eyes. I think for a moment before I start to play Clair de Lune by Debussy. It’s a piece I learned as a child, and I’ve always found it both beautiful and soothing at the same time.

My fingers fly over the keys as I lose myself to the music. The haunting melody

combined with the warmth of Austin's body sitting next to mine, lulls me into a sense of peace. As I play, I steal glances at Austin, his eyes closed as he listens. I pour my heart and soul into the piece, each note a poignant reflection of the emotions swirling within me. I so rarely get to see this side of Austin and I want to do whatever I can to prolong whatever this moment is.

As the last chord fades into silence, I slowly move my hands to my lap and turn to look at him, unsure of what comes next.

He opens his eyes and meets my gaze. There's an intensity in his eyes that I haven't seen before. It's raw, almost primal, and it causes a jolt of desire to rush through me.

His eyes drop to my lips and my heart starts to pound. Is this happening? Is Austin finally going to kiss me?

"Yelena." His voice is rough and just the sound of my name leaving his lips makes my body shiver. He leans toward me, cupping my cheek with his hand. I lick my lips in anticipation, too nervous to even breathe, lest I somehow ruin this.

"You're so beautiful it hurts," he whispers, caressing my cheek.

I lean toward him, aching for his touch.

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“Tell me no,” he whispers, his lips hovering just out of reach of mine. “If you don’t want this, tell me no right now.”

I can’t. I won’t. My entire body feels primed for this moment. Instead, I reach up to rest my hand on his broad, muscular chest and close the distance between us.

The first touch of his lips on mine sends a shockwave through me. That surge of electricity melts away any doubts and fears that I had about our Goddess-given chemistry.

The kiss is hesitant at first, as if we both can’t quite believe this is happening, but Austin soon deepens it, pulling me closer to him. My heart races as his hand slides from my cheek to cradle the back of my head, pulling me closer.

His lips are soft, and I respond eagerly, opening for him as his tongue tangles with mine. I can’t stop the moan that escapes me when he nibbles on my lip. My wolf wants to howl for joy, begging me to rake my nails down his chest and submit my neck for his claiming bite.

I try to ignore my wolf, focusing instead on the fact that Austin’s hands are everywhere, even sliding up my shirt and unhooking my bra. His fingers brush across my nipples, making me shiver in awareness. When he cups my breasts, squeezing them gently, I whimper into his kiss. He’s never touched me like this before. No one has. I love it and I want him to keep going. I bite my lip and arch into his touch, making him hiss.

“Fuck,” he whispers, pulling back to look at me. “Feel what you do to me, Yelena,”

he growls, pulling my hand to his lap and pressing it against the evidence of his arousal.

I bite my lip and flex my hand, palming him through his pants. He feels hot and hard. I stroke him lightly, and it makes him hiss. A small smile dances over my lips. I want to explore him the same way he's exploring me.

He wants me as much as I want him!

He leans in again, stealing my lips in another savage kiss before he pulls away and stands. I whimper, suddenly lost without him.

"Stand," he orders gruffly. I scramble to obey and step out from behind the piano bench. I can feel my cheeks flush as he looks me over. Even though I've known Austin most of my life, I suddenly feel shy under his heat-filled gaze.

As soon as I'm free, he stalks toward me and picks me up, swinging me into his arms. I squeal in surprise when he tosses me over his shoulder like a caveman. Nervous butterflies take over in my stomach. This is actually happening!

Austin carries me through the house like a sack of potatoes over his shoulder, but I couldn't be happier. I want to kick my feet and laugh, the happiness and desire flowing through me is almost enough to make me lightheaded.

He doesn't stop until he reaches his bedroom, kicking open his door and marching us inside. He tosses me onto the bed with a grin, making me bounce on the mattress.

I giggle. I can't believe it. This feels surreal. Austin bringing me back here to his room is...unexpected.

But the ache between my legs is pulsating. I need him. I need this. Whatever has

gotten into him this evening, I'm happy about it.

He pulls his shirt off in one fluid motion before stepping out of his shorts. As shifters, nudity is a daily part of our life. I've seen Austin shift dozens of times, but the sight of his naked body standing at the end of the bed takes my breath away. He is beautiful and rugged and mine.

My hands ache to touch him. He prowls closer and I squirm on the bed.

"You're wearing too many clothes," he says, his voice raspy. I watch as he climbs up on the bed with me. He carefully helps me undress, pulling my shirt up and over my head and easing me out of my pants and underwear. Gently, he pushes me onto my back.

I can't stop the blush that stains my cheeks as he studies my exposed body. No man has ever looked at me like this before. Feeling bold, I open my legs slightly and am rewarded by his sharp intake of breath.

"Fuck, you're gorgeous," he says, leaning down to nuzzle my collarbone. With each little kiss, I writhe with pleasure at his touch and whimper when his lips trail lower. When his mouth closes around one of my nipples, I almost arch off the bed with a gasp.

He sucks gently and I moan. This all feels like a dream. Every nerve ending in my body feels alive as he worships me with his mouth and hands. Since I've grown up knowing that Austin is my Fated Mate, I've never had a reason to explore my sexuality with anyone other than myself. He's the only one that I've ever wanted or will ever want.

Each caress of his hands or lips on my body is a first for me and each one makes me want more. It's like he's awakened a part of me that I've been forced to keep

dormant, and now I feel out of control. All I want is for him to touch me.

After what feels like an eternity, he reaches between my legs, sliding his fingers through my damp core. My hips buck forward involuntarily when his fingers brush against my clit.

“You’re so wet,” he growls, slipping one finger inside me and then a second. “Your tight little pussy is desperate for me, isn’t it?”

His fingers are rough, and his dirty words make me blush but, as he strokes me my pleasure grows.

“Please,” I gasp when he increases the tempo and slides a third finger inside me, stretching me.

“You’re going to take everything I give you and more, Yelena,” he promises as I buck and moan around his hand. “This pretty pink pussy is all mine.”

I can’t speak. All I can do is stare at him and whimper as he drives me higher and higher toward my pleasure. I want to tell him that all of me belongs to him. It always has and it always will. But the words are stuck in my throat. All I can manage is a moan.

When I start to shake, he looks down at me with a triumphant smile. “You’re going to come all over my hand, aren’t you, beautiful?” he whispers.

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I open my mouth to answer, but he leans down to capture my lips in a feral kiss. It sends a delicious thrill through me, and I explode with a cry.

“Good girl,” Austin praises, withdrawing his hand and positioning the head of his thick cock at my entrance.

“Please,” I beg, looking up at him with wild eyes. “I need more. I need...you.”

He smiles a little half smile and his eyes darken.

With one swift thrust, he fills me completely, and I arch up to meet him. For my first time, I expected there to be more discomfort, maybe even pain, but the preparation he had given me seems to be sufficient. He slowly pulls out, teasing me with every delicious inch, before thrusting in again.

I’ve never felt this full before.

I reach out to touch him, my fingers tracing the lines of his chest and abdomen, enjoying the feel of his heat against my skin as his muscles flex under the strain. His rhythm builds steadily, each movement deliberate and controlled.

I cling to him, my nails digging into his skin as I match his pace.

“You feel so good,” Austin groans, his hips moving faster. His fingertips dig into the soft skin of my thighs as he pounds into me. His voice is a low growl that sends shivers down my spine. I want to see that primal side of him, so I nod in understanding, urging him on with my eyes.

I open my mouth to answer but he leans down to capture my lips in a feral kiss. It sends a delicious thrill through me. As if on cue, my back arches off the bed as I shatter into a thousand pieces beneath him, my release washing over me in wave after wave of pleasure.

I moan, my body trembling as I feel him start to swell inside me. He thrusts one final time, and I reach up to wrap my legs around his waist, pulling him deeper into me.

His release hits me like a tidal wave, floods me with heat, and sends me over the edge. My body convulses, and I scream out his name as I feel the waves of ecstasy crash over me, leaving me breathless and weak in his arms.

As the intensity fades, I lie there, panting, his weight pressing against me, and I feel completely and utterly spent.

So, this is what it's supposed to feel like.

Chapter Seven

Austin

Early morning sunlight filters in from the window, momentarily blinding me as I squint and yawn. I blink a few times, my eyes adjusting to the brightness. Yelena stirs beside me, and I take a moment to enjoy the feeling of her soft curves pressed up against me. Her hair is splayed across the pillow, and she looks so peaceful lying next to me. So right.

But, as the memories of last night start to flood back in painfully vivid detail. Her sweet kisses, the way she submitted to me, the way she begged me for more like an exquisite fantasy come to life...I stiffen.

Oh, shit.

I swallow hard. There's a twisting sensation in my gut that makes me want to puke. I slept with her. That happened, and now....

I sit up and carefully ease myself away from her. My body immediately misses her warmth.

What have I done? How could I have been this stupid?

I groan and cover my face with my hands before dragging myself out of bed. I move stealthily, careful not to wake her.

She whimpers in her sleep, curling around her pillow. The blanket has slipped off her shoulder, giving me a tantalizing peek at her body in the early morning light.

My cock stirs, and I remember how tight she felt when I drove into her last night.

"Austin," she had whispered, her voice straining with need. "Please... Don't stop..."

"No. Get a grip on yourself," I chastise myself as I pull on my shorts.

I need to clear my head to think about what comes next, and clearly, I can't do that next to her.

Quickly, I pull on some clothes and slip out of the bedroom. Once I'm in the relative safety of the hallway, I lean against the wall and take a deep breath.

The enormity of what I've done hits me like a punch to the gut. Sleeping with Yelena was everything I thought it would be. Her warmth and responsiveness to me were all I could have asked for and yet, I know it was a mistake.

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I've spent years keeping my distance, and now, in a moment of pure weakness, I've gone and complicated everything. She's going to think that things have changed between us, assume I'm ready for this life.

Fuck.

My head pounds as I stumble into the kitchen, hoping a strong cup of coffee will somehow materialize and help me sort out this mess. Yelena is usually the one who sets up the coffeemaker and leaves an easy breakfast for me to grab in the morning. When I walk into the kitchen, the smell of dark roast fills the air, and I feel an uneasy appreciation for my intended-mate flood through me.

The automatic coffeemaker is brewing, and there's a plate of muffins covered in plastic wrap on the kitchen island.

She takes good care of me. Even though I push her away.

The uneasy feeling turns to guilt as I pour myself a cup of the piping hot brew and pull out a muffin.

Blueberry. My favorite. It's unnerving the way she knows me so well.

I take a bite, barely tasting it as my mind spins. What the hell am I going to say to her when she wakes up? How can I look her in the eye after last night?

I curse under my breath. I never should have let things go so far.

As I take my first sip of coffee, I feel a jolt of energy rush through me. I close my eyes and savor the warmth as it travels down my throat.

I'm so lost in my thoughts that I don't hear the back door open. It's only when I hear my mother's voice that my eyes snap open.

"Austin, sweetheart, you're up early," she says, bustling into the kitchen with my father trailing behind her.

I nearly choke on my coffee. Mom just smiles and walks over to kiss me on the cheek. She's carrying a large vase of wildflowers which she places on the counter.

"Son," my father greets me with a nod. His gaze travels over my disheveled appearance, one eyebrow raised. "Rough night?"

I grunt noncommittally, avoiding his probing stare by taking another swig of coffee. The hot liquid scalds my tongue, but I barely register the discomfort.

He helps himself to a mug off the counter and fills it with coffee.

"Mom, Father...what are you doing here?" I manage to say, setting down my mug. I immediately think of Yelena, still asleep in my bed, and my pulse pounds. The last thing I need is my parents finding out about that.

"We have some exciting news for you and Yelena!" my mother beams, her eyes sparkling. "Where is she?" Her voice is bright, almost giddy. It sets me on edge.

I cough and my mind races to come up with something that my parents will accept but that won't be suspicious.

I gesture to the muffins on the island. "She's still asleep. I am going to bring her

breakfast in a little while.”

My mother smiles at me. “How considerate! Well, I will let you be the one to tell her the good news, then!”

"What news?" I ask warily. An uneasy feeling coils in my gut. Whatever they're about to say, I know I won't like it.

Father moves to stand next to me, and my stomach drops.

“We’ve set the date for your mating ceremony!” he booms, clapping me on the shoulder forcefully. “You and Yelena will be bound together before the Moon Goddess and the Pack at a Full Moon Ceremony in two months’ time.”

My head spins as I try to process my father's words. I knew this day was coming, but a part of me had hoped it never would.

Two months. I only have two short months left before I’m shackled for life.

The walls of the kitchen seem to close in around me.

"No," I choke out, shaking my head vehemently. "I'm not ready. I don't want this."

My mother's smile falters, and she exchanges a concerned glance with my father. "Austin, what do you mean? You've known this was coming for a long time now. You're Fated. Blessed by the Moon Goddess herself!"

"I don't care!" I snap, slamming my mug down on the counter. Hot coffee sloshes over the rim, splattering across the granite. "This is my life we're talking about. I should get a say in who I marry and when, and I'm telling you, I don't want her."

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The words come out harsher than I intend, but I can't take them back now.

Father's eyes narrow dangerously. "You don't have a choice, son. The decision has been made. You will fulfill your duty to this pack and take Yelena as your mate."

"To hell with duty!" I snarl, slamming my palm down on the counter. "I should get some say in this!"

Mother gasps, her hand flying to her mouth. "Austin!"

"No! You don't get to guilt me into this, Mom! Not this time!"

My father growls, a deep rumble that vibrates through the kitchen. His eyes flash with barely contained anger. "You will not speak to your mother that way."

"It's not just about what you want," my father retorts. "This union was destined by the Goddess herself. To refuse would be an insult to Her and everything our pack stands for. You are destined to be mates. This isn't a choice!"

I let out a harsh laugh. "I'm well aware that you think I should have no choices here."

I clench my jaw, meeting his steely gaze head on. The tension crackles between us, neither one willing to back down.

"I'm a grown man," I say through gritted teeth. "I can make my own decisions. And I'm deciding that I don't want to marry Yelena. I won't do it."

My father's eyes blaze with anger at my outburst. He opens his mouth to reprimand me when a small gasp from the doorway makes us all freeze.

I whip my head around to see Yelena standing there, her face pale and eyes wide with shock. She's wearing one of my t-shirts that falls to her bare thighs. Her hair is tangled, both from sleep and sex. There's no mistaking what we did last night.

"Yelena..." I breathe out, my heart clenching painfully in my chest.

Tears well up in her eyes as she stares at me. "You don't want me?" her voice is small and broken.

"I..." I falter, unable to find the words. I glance helplessly at my parents, who are looking between us in growing realization and disapproval.

"I heard what you said, Austin," Yelena whispers, a tear slipping down her cheek. "You made yourself quite clear. I'm just...I'm going to go."

She turns on her heel and flees from the kitchen before I can respond. The sound of her footsteps running down the hall echoes in the sudden silence.

I hear the front door open and then slam shut. I stand frozen, staring at the spot where she stood. The devastation on her face is seared into my mind.

My heart clenches painfully as I watch Yelena's silver wolf streak away into the forest through the kitchen window, her pained howl piercing the morning air.

"What have you done, Austin?" my mother whispers, her voice heavy with disappointment.

"You will fix this," my father snarls.

Chapter Eight

Yelena

The forest floor is soft and littered with pine needles. It's comforting in its predictability. I'm grateful that I had at least remembered to carry clothing with me this time when I shifted, but the T-shirt I pulled over my head is Austin's. I wish I would have had the sense to grab a pair of sweatpants, too. It's a brisk Fall morning, and the breeze is chilly in the forest.

His scent covers me, causing a spiky twinge of pain in my chest. I trip over a tree root and fall, landing face-first on the forest floor. The taste of dirt and bark fills my mouth. It's bitter, a stark reminder of my current reality. I don't know if I want to scream, cry, or simply lay there and become part of the forest for a while.

After a long minute, I push myself back up with a sigh, brushing the dirt off my face. At least out here, I'm alone and no one can judge me for being a mess.

I crawl over to lean up against a nearby towering pine tree and shiver. Austin's t-shirt is too big, hanging down almost to my knees. The fabric is soft against my skin, yet another reminder of how it felt to be held by him last night.

When I woke up this morning, I was so excited. Waking up in Austin's bed, with a new ache between my thighs, it felt like the start of something new between us. A solution to the tension that always seems to be between us. I went out to the kitchen to find him with a hopeful heart and dreams of perhaps sharing conversation at breakfast before convincing him to stay home this morning so we could explore each other again.

"You should have stayed in bed," I mutter to myself.

How could I have known, though?

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Last night, I thought we had truly connected as mates. What had started as a confrontation and another evening managing our strained relationship had morphed into something beyond my wildest expectations.

Affection. Care. Passion.

I took a risk, and I let him in. I shared with him, not only my body, but a part of my soul.

If he didn't want that, didn't want me, so why did he hold me with such tenderness last night? How could he have faked kissing me with such passion?

A sob threatens to rip through me when I remember the way he held me as I shattered around him, my pleasure drenching us both.

For one beautiful moment, I thought he had finally chosen me. I think that's why this hurts so much.

I take a shuddering breath. His scent from the shirt, mixed with that of pine, damp earth, and the tell-tale markers of our pack boundary lines, invades my nose.

At least I'm still on Nightwing land.

When I took off running this morning, I wasn't paying attention to where I was going. I just needed to escape. To outrun the words I had heard him scream at his mother. I needed my wolf to save me, and she did.

I don't want to marry Yelena. I won't do it.

I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to block it out. But I can't. His voice is all I can hear. Even my wolf feels despondent.

How can he feel this way when we were paired by the Moon Goddess Herself? It doesn't make sense.

Our lore tells us that Fated Mates are destined to be together. Their souls are intertwined. Even if they are perfect strangers, destined mates are supposed to grow together because their compatibility and affection for each other has already been assured by fate.

It goes against logic that Austin can continuously push me away like this. Could the Moon Goddess have made a mistake? Was the Seer wrong when she prophesied that we were a destined pair?

I lean against the tree trunk and stare up at the scattered rays of sunlight that filter through the thick canopy above.

Maybe Austin and I were doomed from the start. I sigh heavily and brush a tear from my cheek.

As much as I love him, I know I don't want to spend the rest of my life being an afterthought or a burden, just waiting for him to notice me. I want a mate who is excited to be with me, who takes an interest in my life, and who loves making me smile. Someone who is proud to have me as their partner.

I want what our traditions have told us: partners who are devoted to each other.

If Austin can't be that, or won't, it stands to reason that perhaps he isn't my true

Fated Mate and I shouldn't be with him at all.

But the mere idea of not being with Austin makes another jolt of pain flare in my chest. Yet, it seems to be the only way out of this heart-wrenching spiral. If we aren't true mates, shouldn't we break this engagement so that we are free to find our real ones?

More tears fall down my cheek and I don't bother wiping them.

Or maybe Fated Mates don't exist at all. My subconscious whispers. Maybe you should grow up and stop believing in fairy tales.

A harsh laugh tears itself from my throat. There's an echo of bitter truth in that thought. It feels sacrilegious to even consider that all I've been taught, all I've hoped for, is truly nothing more than a fantasy masked in tradition.

The sting of betrayal by my own naive belief cuts deeper than any wound Austin's words could have inflicted. My mind races, and disbelief lingers like an uninvited guest refusing to leave.

The notion that two people could be destined for each other, fated to meet, fall in love, grow together and stand by each other for the remainder of their days. A beautiful dream. But I have been wishing and hoping for so long now. Too long.

And what do I have to show for it? Nothing but heartbreak and rejection.

My thoughts are interrupted by the sudden snapping of twigs nearby. My head snaps and I hold my breath, trying to ignore the pounding heartbeat in my ears.

"Austin?" I call out, my voice trembling.

“No.”

The response is not the one I was expecting, but relief floods through me at the familiar voice.

“Dad.”

Fresh tears start when he comes into view, his silver hair glinting in the sunlight that filters through the trees.

"You're far from home," he says softly. His eyes are concerned as they study me, taking in my tear-streaked face and Austin's oversized T-shirt.

I sniffle and wipe away the tears with the back of my hand. "Why are you here?"

"I thought you might need me," he admits, settling down beside me against the tree trunk. "Your Luna called and informed me about what happened with Austin. I left the city at once and came to find you."

I say nothing for a moment, just taking in the sight of him. I can't believe he's here. We rarely get to see each other because of the distance.

"Austin doesn't want me," I blurt out finally, unable to stop the fresh wave of tears that come with those words. "And I can't do this anymore."

He looks at me, his hazel eyes filled with compassion. He doesn't say anything, but he doesn't need to. His presence alone is comforting enough. I lean into him, resting my head on his shoulder, and weep.

“Oh, Yelena.” He wraps an arm around me and pulls me closer.

"I don't understand why," I sob into his shoulder. My words are barely audible,

muffled by his shirt. "The Moon Goddess chose him for me. That's what everyone said. That's what I believed. I've tried to be what he needs. I thought Fated Mates were supposed to...to want each other."

"They are," he says quietly, "but life isn't simple, and neither is fate."

"What does that mean?" I ask.

"In our world," he begins slowly, choosing his words with care, "we believe in the power of Fate, that people and events are predetermined by the Moon Goddess. But there's something we often forget: free will."

I pull back to stare at him. My chest feels like it might crack open from the weight of my heartbreak.

"Even if two souls are bound by destiny, they still have the freedom to make their own choices, tread their own paths. The Moon Goddess may show us the path but walking it...that's up to us. You have to choose to accept your Fate. You have, but Austin has not."

His voice is gentle, yet firm and he traces soothing circles on my back.

"But what am I supposed to do, then?" I cry out. "I've been ready. I've been waiting. I've held on even when it hurts...I chose him! Over and over, I chose us, yet he doesn't choose me."

"I just..." I choke on my words for a second before continuing. "I just wanted us to be happy."

"And you still can be," he says gently, wiping my tears away with his thumb. "But maybe it's time to consider that your happiness doesn't necessarily have to include

Austin. Whatever you choose to do, sweetheart, I will support you.”

Painful as it may be, I know there’s wisdom in his words.

My stomach growls and I squirm, uncomfortably. I have no idea what time it is, but judging from the sun in the sky, it’s been several hours since I left home. I’m hungry and emotionally wrecked.

“I should get back,” I murmur. He stands, pulling me to my feet and into a tight hug. I lean into him, taking the support he has given me.

“Thanks for coming to find me, Dad,” I whisper against his chest.

“I’ll always come find you, darling girl,” he whispers back, pressing a soft kiss to the top of my head.

“Do you want me to run back with you?” he asks when we finally break apart. I sniffle and shake my head no.

“I need the space to gather my thoughts,” I tell him with a wobbly smile.

He nods and then steps back into the woods, shifting into his tawny wolf easily. I watch as he trots off into the woods and disappears from view.

With a deep, centering breath, I also shift, this time allowing my wolf form to rip Austin’s shirt off my body.

The ripped shirt stays on the forest floor as I begin the long run back home.

It’s late afternoon by the time I emerge from the clearing and see the familiar pack buildings appear. I approach our cottage cautiously. Sniffing the air, I am relieved to

find that Alpha Malaki and Luna Elizabeth are no longer in the area, but Austin's scent is still very strong.

Shit.

I step up onto our porch and the door swings open before I can shift back to my human form. Austin stands in the doorway, his face pinched with worry.

Wordlessly, he stands aside to allow me to enter. I slip past him, shifting back as soon as I'm in the living room.

"Yelena," he begins, knotting his hands at his side. "What I said earlier. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that. I'm sorry if that hurts your feelings."

Is he delusional? How could he think it would do anything but hurt my feelings?!

I stare at him, but he doesn't say anything else and suddenly, I feel more tired than I've ever felt before.

All the words and reprimands that I had practiced in my head on my run back to the cottage are gone now, leaving only intense emotional exhaustion in their place.

I shake my head and turn to leave. I don't want to fight, I don't want to hear excuses, I don't even want to talk.

The only thing I truly want at this moment is food and a shower. I don't need Austin for that.

"Yelena, say something," he pleads.

But I just turn and walk toward my room. There's nothing left for me to say. At least not tonight.

Chapter Nine

Yelena

I slide the crisp ten-dollar bill into the envelope with the other bills and smile grimly to myself. This money represents a secret promise that I've made to myself, a tangible sign that my plan is real. It's my way out.

Over the last two weeks, I've managed to squirrel away almost a thousand in cash by selling tinctures, babysitting for various packmates, and keeping back a few dollars here and there from errands. It's not as much as I'd like to have, but it's enough to help me on the road when I leave. It will have to be.

"Yelena! Breakfast is ready!" Austin calls out, cheerfully.

I grimace and carefully tuck the envelope back into the bottom of the tampon box and hide it under the sink.

"Ok, thank you," I call back, double-checking that the lock was still turned on the bathroom door.

Austin has been more attentive in the last two weeks than he has...ever. I don't know what to make of it. Suddenly, he's talking to me. Making breakfast. Asking me my opinion on things. He even folded my laundry the other day when I was out.

He's been supportive. Kind. Friendly. It's messing with my head.

Sometimes I wonder if my plan was created too hastily. If this is the new Austin,

shouldn't I want to stay and see it through?

I stand, brushing my hands off on my jeans, and look at my reflection in the mirror. I barely recognize myself. My cheekbones are more pronounced and I look paler. Dark purple smudges linger under my eyes—evidence of my lack of sleep. I've had difficulty keeping food down and sleeping for days now.

My breath catches in my throat when I think about my plan. The thought of actually going through with it and turning my back on my pack, my family, weighs heavily on my heart. Leaving Nightwing Pack is not something I ever wanted to have to do, but I don't see any other option.

"You can do this," I tell my reflection in the mirror. With another deep breath, I paste a fake smile on my face and go out to have breakfast with my intended mate...possibly for the last time.

The smell of burned eggs and toast wafts through the house as I step out of the bathroom, a gentle reminder that Austin is trying, in his own way. His cooking has been...an experience. But he's trying, and it's hard not to feel hopeful about that.

When I arrive in the kitchen, Austin is pouring scrambled eggs onto a plate, his back turned to me. He's seldom cooked before, and it shows, but the last two weeks he has insisted on trying. The sight of him, so normal, so domestic, tugs at my heart. I almost want to believe that things can be different. Almost.

"Morning," he says, turning to face me. He's holding the plate up proudly and my eyes widen when I see the table is set, complete with fresh flowers. "You look lovely today."

His bright smile is disconcertingly real, reaching up to the corners of his eyes. I manage a weak smile in return.

"Morning," I reply, taking a seat at the table.

He sets a heaping plate before me and for a moment, we fall into silence. I push the eggs around on my plate, too nervous to actually eat them.

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If he notices, he doesn't say anything. His conversation is light and requires little input from me. He tells me about his work schedule, and which members of the pack he needs to go see, and how the training of the new guards is going. It feels completely disconnected from the chaos that is tumbling around my mind.

For months, I've wanted this, this banal conversation and companionship over a meal. I would have given anything to have him like this before I knew the truth. But I can't undo what I heard.

He doesn't want me.

I assume his father, our Alpha, has ordered him to fix this.

All of these little gestures aren't because he wants me, they're because he's following orders.

It's too little, too late.

I choke down a few more bites of breakfast and try to focus.

"Yelena, are you okay?" Austin asks, his voice breaking through my thoughts. His silver eyes meet mine and for the briefest moment, I swear I can see a flicker of true concern.

I muster up some enthusiasm and take a big bite of my buttery toast.

"I'm fine," I lie, talking around the mouthful. "Just tired."

He nods slowly in understanding and continues to shovel his food in his mouth.

“Maybe you should take a nap,” he adds with a small smile, “I would hate for you to get overly tired.”

I struggle to control my expression. His concern would be laughable and adorable if it were real, but because it’s not, it’s mostly infuriating. My decision to leave was the right one. I know that now.

“Maybe,” I shrug, tossing the bread crust on my plate and pushing it away from me.

He glances at the clock on the wall and curses, standing suddenly.

“I’m late for work. I have to run, but tell you what, I’ll stop by the pie shop this evening and bring you your favorite chocolate mousse pie for dessert!”

My favorite pie flavor is actually apple, but I don’t bother correcting him. Instead, I stand to take my plate up to the sink. He’s carrying his plate as well and we meet in the middle, awkwardly bumping into each other.

“Sorry,” he says, stepping back.

“No, that was me. I should have looked where I was going,” I say quietly.

The tension between us feels even more awkward, and I don’t know what to do. There’s a knot forming in my chest, and everything just hurts. I want this feeling to end, but the prospect of leaving feels so painful too.

We both set our dishes down at the same time. He turns and brushes his hand across my cheek. I hate that I still get butterflies from his touch.

On impulse I step into his caress and wrap my hands around his waist, giving him a quick hug. He's stiff at first before he relaxes and hugs me back. His strong arms hold me tightly and I feel a small tingle of butterflies in my core. I hold him tighter, savoring this stolen moment of affection. In my own way, perhaps I'm saying goodbye to him.

"Have a good day," he murmurs into my hair before releasing me and heading out the door.

Watching him go, I feel a pang of sorrow and an odd sense of relief.

With trembling fingers, I run my hand across my cheek where he had touched me. It still tingles, a ghostly reminder of what we could have been. I shake off the thought. There's no point in dwelling on things beyond reach. I hear the rumble of Austin's motorcycle pull out of the driveway and watch from the kitchen window as it disappears down our road.

I walk back into the kitchen and start cleaning up, trying to keep my mind focused on the task at hand. It's a soothing routine; washing dishes, wiping counters...simple things that keep me grounded in reality.

Once everything is clean, it's time to go.

Gathering my belongings takes very little time. I have my purse and tote bag with my precious stash of cash and enough snacks to get me through the next few days and a small overnight bag with my favorite clothes. The shoebox with my photos and trinkets from my childhood has been hidden in the trunk of my old car for days now. I'd saved for two years in high school to afford this old thing, working odd jobs here and there. It's not flashy, with faded paint and a few small rips in the seat upholstery, but it's reliable. And, most importantly, it's mine.

I look around our shared cottage one last time and a deep sense of sadness fills my being. When I moved in here, I was full of so much hope for the future and now, that future doesn't even exist.

Outside, I quickly lock up and move my belongings to the car. Most of my neighbors are at work, but the ones that are out wave to me. I wave back with a smile, praying to the Moon Goddess that no one thinks anything is amiss. I need to make sure I can get a head start before Austin realizes I'm gone.

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I slide behind the wheel and slam the door shut. I take a moment to breathe, resting my forehead against the steering wheel. My heart is pounding in my chest, and I force myself to take slow, deep breaths until it returns to normal.

With one last glance at the cottage that was supposed to be my home, I start the car and pull out of the driveway. The road through our pack lands stretches out in front of me and I drive slowly, knowing that this decision is going to open my life up to possibilities I can't even envision yet. Every mile that passes feels like a small victory, as if I'm claiming back parts of myself that had been lost.

The road winds through our lands and I drive slowly, careful not to draw attention to myself. I pass by the school and my heart hurts that I won't be able to say goodbye to Hannah.

"Don't forget me," I whisper as I pass.

At the stop sign, I squint into the sun and nearly jump out of my skin when there's a knock on the window. I turn, heart pounding, and see the smiling face of Callie, her silver-gray hair glowing under the midday sun.

Wordlessly, she gestures for me to roll down the window. Her eyes bore into mine with intensity.

"You are leaving?" she asks, but it feels more like a statement.

"Yes," I admit, surprised at how firm my voice sounds. "I am."

She offers a nod of understanding, her gaze softer now. The silent empathy in her eyes touches me more deeply than any words could. Of all the people in the pack, Callie is the closest thing I have to a confidant. She knows how hard I've tried, but I'm still surprised that she isn't trying to convince me to stay. Perhaps this has been my destiny all along.

"You have a long journey ahead, Yelena," Callie says, her voice tender. "Remember that sometimes, our path leads us into the wilderness before it takes us home."

Her words are cryptic, as always. But there's a certain comfort in them, a subtle reassurance that this isn't the end of the world and I'm making the right choice. Even if it doesn't feel like it. I need to know, in a time like this, that the Moon Goddess isn't going to abandon me completely.

"I'll remember," I promise her. And I mean it.

"May the Moon Goddess guide your way," she says, placing a hand on mine and squeezing gently. It feels like a blessing. "And may you always know that our Goddess never gives her children more than they can bear. Your path is set and you must follow it. By doing so, you will find your happiness and bring happiness to others."

"Thank you, Callie," is all I manage to say before she steps back and gives me a final nod.

"Go with peace, child," she whispers before turning away.

I roll up the window and pull out, turning toward the highway that will take me toward the city.

I watch her in the rearview mirror until she's nothing more than a speck.

As my car leaves the pack's territories, the familiar landscape of forest, mountains, fields and small houses slowly start to fade away.

The empty road stretches on for miles in front of me, the calm inviting me to journey ahead. I take in a deep breath, exhale slowly, and hit the gas pedal.

My future awaits.

Chapter Ten

Austin

My motorcycle skids to a stop in the gravel and I step out, hurrying toward our house. I can't believe I left my phone at home. It must have been the hug that Yelena gave me before I left, distracting me from my responsibilities. Ever since we slept together and had our disastrous falling out, she's been distant.

I feel terribly guilty. I shouldn't have slept with her, it's only confused things. To make up for it, I've tried to make an effort, seeking her out and intentionally spending time with her, but we've barely touched. It just feels...awkward. The fact that she not only was willing to touch me this morning, but that she initiated it, soothes my wolf while also making me nervous.

Yelena's blue Honda sedan is not in its spot out front, and I try to remember if she told me what she was up to today. It's a Wednesday and I think that's the day she goes to the store, but I can never remember.

I jog up the steps, the familiar creak of the wooden porch under my boots barely registering. When I look over, I freeze at the sight of a very familiar silver Mercedes parked on the side of our house.

Are my parents here?

I sniff the air and sure enough, the scent of my parents and Callie, our pack Seer, are overwhelming.

That's unusual. A pit in my stomach opens. Something is wrong.

The front door swings open before I can even reach for the doorknob, revealing Callie.

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“Come inside, child,” she says, stepping back to usher me into my own home.

My mother is seated on the couch, her eyes red-rimmed, and my father is standing behind her.

“What happened?” I ask, urgently. “Did someone die? What’s wrong?”

“Austin,” Callie says, leading me to the recliner and pushing me toward it. “When did you last see Yelena?”

I look at her dumbly. “Yelena? This morning, at breakfast. It wasn’t even an hour ago!”

She nods. “Did she say anything to you that was unusual or act different from usual?”

I stare at her blankly and wrack my brain to try and understand why Callie of all people is asking me these questions.

“No...” I answer slowly. “She was pretty quiet, but she hasn’t been sleeping well. She ate her toast and eggs. She gave me a hug goodbye, we talked about me bringing home a pie. Is she okay? Did something happen to her?”

My heart is racing, and I feel sick inside at the thought of something potentially harming Yelena.

My mother leans forward and places her hand on my arm.

“Yelena left the pack this morning,” she says quietly. “Forever.”

I lean back, my mind struggling to comprehend the words.

“No. What? You must be mistaken.” I croak out. “Why would she do that?”

“I told you to fix what you broke,” my father roars, glaring at me. “And now look at what you’ve done!”

“We don’t know her reasons for leaving. We must trust that the Moon Goddess has a plan for us all,” Callie answers gently, “What we know right now is that she packed her car and drove away this morning.”

Yelena left the pack. She’s gone. She drove away.

On an intellectual level, I understand the words she’s saying to me, but it’s hard for me to comprehend their truth. It feels as if my heart has been physically ripped from my chest and thrown on the floor.

Yelena is gone.

My wolf howls in pain, and I can barely stand and stagger to the doorway before my shift overtakes me.

My clothing rips as I leap forward into my wolf form and take off toward the forest. I need to find her, to stop her. Nothing else matters.

I can’t find her scent, but I let my wolf lead the way, and we rush through the forest toward the mountain road.

We bound over the hard, uneven ground, the rustling leaves and snapping twigs

beneath us barely registering as my lungs burn from the exertion. My mind is a whirlwind of denial and panic as I try to push faster, harder. The wind rushes past, whipping my fur back as I run faster than I ever have before. Sharp rocks occasionally pierce the pads of my feet, but the pain only propels me further.

All I can think about is Yelena.

But no matter how fast I run, I know I won't catch her. It's been almost an hour. She could be anywhere by now.

Regret and pain hit me in waves. She didn't just leave our pack, she left me.

The edge of the forest gives way to a curved stretch of mountain road, and I skid to a stop, raising my snout to cast about for any trace of her scent on the wind.

Nothing.

I can see the overlook from here—a cliff that is high enough that I can see the winding mountain road leading away from the pack lands.

My heart clenches at the sight of a small blue speck disappearing around a bend—Yelena's car.

I'm too late.

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I let out a howl, long and mournful, releasing the pain and shock into the air. My wolf whimpers, nudging at my consciousness with his own sorrow. This pain is unfamiliar. I don't know how to process it. I only know that Yelena's absence feels like a physical wound. It's a raw, gaping hole in my heart.

She's gone. She actually left. And with her, a piece of me is suddenly gone too.

I stagger to a rock and sit, unable to stand any longer. The agony washes over me in waves.

Reality hits me like an eighteen-wheeler. I love her. And now she's gone.

Chapter Eleven

Yelena

Five years later

"Yelena!" My keys jingle in my hand as I turn to see who is calling me. Weston, one of the newest nurses on our team, comes running up.

"Did you need something, Wes?" I ask, curiously. Unlike most of the nursing staff at Ruby Clinic, Weston didn't come to us from the university, but rather had experience as a medic in the military. He's been a great addition to my team, but his knowledge of protocols and boundaries needs some work.

"I just wanted to know if you were free tonight," he says, giving me a charming

smile. “There’s live music over at the Marina Tavern and I thought you could come with me and get a drink.”

An uneasy feeling starts in the pit of my stomach, and I force a small smile. It’s not the first invitation I’ve received since I’ve worked here. My colleagues are nice enough, but as head nurse, I have to keep a firm boundary in place to prevent fraternization with my subordinates.

Weston is a nice guy, so I try to let him down gently.

“Oh, Weston. I’m sorry, I’m not available,” I reply. Due to my position, I can’t go out with colleagues.”

His face falls, and he nods, and the air between us suddenly feels awkward.

“Have you asked Kiera?” I suggest, thinking of my bubbly assistant. “She’s single and loves music!”

His face brightens a little, and he shoves his hands in his pockets. “Maybe I’ll ask her. Thanks, boss.”

I nod and keep moving toward my car. It’s been a long day and I’m ready to get home.

As I unlock the car door, I glance back at the clinic where I’ve spent the last half decade of my life. The Ruby Clinic is a small, but well-regarded private clinic. Known for our embrace of both holistic and modern medicine, we have patients who travel for hours to come see us. It took me a long time to adjust to the more individualistic life that humans lead. At home, the pack is always there for each other. But here, life feels more isolated and lonely. Sure, I’ve made friends, but the inherent closeness that my wolf craves is never present.

At least my work has been successful. In the time I've been here, I've studied hard and taken every class and training offered to me. I've worked my way up from nursing assistant trainee all the way to my position now, as head of nursing services.

Sometimes, when I think of the day I came here—fresh from the pack, untrained and nervous. It feels like it's been a lifetime instead of only five years. It was so hard at first. What little money I had brought with me was hardly enough. My father tried to help where he could, but I never let him know just how bad it was. Without a job, I was unable to rent an apartment or even have enough money to buy food. Before I got the job at the clinic, I spent two weeks sleeping during the day in my car and working the clean-up crew at the local movie theater at night. I shudder as I remember the taste of the stale popcorn I salvaged from the buckets each night. I don't think I'll ever enjoy popcorn again.

When my situation became even more desperate, with two lines on a pregnancy test showing up when I least expected it, I considered returning home. Giving up. But the Moon Goddess led me to the Ruby Clinic by way of a job posting I saw by chance in a newspaper. It is only by Her grace that I was even granted an interview. I cried when they offered me the job as a nursing assistant trainee. The starting wage was enough to afford a small, studio apartment. I still remember the day I got the keys. I sat in the tiny, empty space, hugging my arms to my chest and praying that everything was going to work out.

I shake off the thoughts, finally sinking into my seat and starting the engine. The trip home is automatic, every movement stitched into muscle memory. My car glides along familiar roads until I park it in front of my modest townhouse. I step out of the car and immediately, my instincts heighten. That feeling of being watched makes a prickle of unease crawl across my skin.

I look around my quiet neighborhood, assessing it for threats. There's movement at the window of my house, and a small, familiar figure disappears from view behind

the curtain. I smile to myself and relax, ready for any surprise I will get. Before I can even put my keys away, the door bursts open and a little girl darts out, an impish grin splitting her lovely face.

"Mommy!" she shrieks before launching herself into my arms. "Did I scare you?"

"Easy there, tiger," I laugh, hugging her tight as her nanny hobbles after her, panting.

"Sorry, Miss Yelena," the nanny gasps, her hand on her chest. "Cleo got away from me when I was in the kitchen."

I smile warmly at the older woman.

"It's fine, Susan," I reassure her, holding Cleo on my hip. "This little rascal can be a handful."

Cleo giggles and leans her head on my shoulder, making my entire body glow with happiness.

She is, by far, the best thing I've ever done with my life. I thank the Moon Goddess every day for choosing me to be her mother.

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We all troop back into the house, and Cleo dashes off to the table to show me her latest art project.

“I hope she wasn’t too much of a handful?” I ask Susan, setting my work bag on the small entryway table.

“No more than usual,” she replies, fetching her coat. “Your Cleo is a bright little thing. She’s going places, that one!”

I smile in agreement and hand an envelope of cash to our nanny. “I have tomorrow off, so we will see you Thursday?” I confirm as I walk her out the door.

She smiles and nods at me and I close the door behind her.

When I turn around, Cleo is waiting for me. She has a collage in her hands and, at the center of it, is a large black wolf. Immediately, I think of Austin and I stifle my gasp, crouching down on her level to better see her art.

How could she know?

“Miss Susan helped me!” she says, proudly. “It’s a wolf. He’s sad.”

My heart aches and I press a kiss to her head.

“I’m sorry the wolf is sad,” I whisper, closing my eyes for a moment to pull myself together. “Do you think it would make the wolf happier if we had macaroni for dinner?”

She cheers and I press a final kiss to her head before walking back to my small bedroom to change. Once I'm in my house clothes, I start dinner, making the macaroni and cheese that my young daughter loves so much.

I watch her from my vantage point in the kitchen as she plays with her stuffed animals, her long black hair pulled back in a braid. She's Austin's clone. The same black hair, the same slightly crooked nose. The same dimple when she smiles.

Sometimes, late at night, I let myself wonder what would have happened if I had stayed and told Austin about my pregnancy.

Would he have stepped up and been a partner and a father, or would he have rejected us both? Would he have learned to love us both? Or even just her?

The not knowing was part of my agonizing decision to stay away. I can handle his rejection of me, but I could never stand by and watch if he ever rejected her.

It's better this way. She won't ever have to feel the kind of emotional pain I did, I tell myself as I stir the cheese sauce onto the pasta.

"Dinner's ready," I call out, making Cleo giggle and run to the table. I dish up her plate and set it before her. She gobbles it down with gusto and I laugh when she gets cheese sauce on her nose.

We go through our bedtime routine of bath, book, and then a song. When I finally tuck her in, her beautiful eyes drifting shut the second her head hits the pillow, a pang of loneliness hits me.

I creep out of her room, closing the door gently. The feeling of loneliness is so strong, it almost takes my breath away.

I put on the kettle and lean against the kitchen island. The life I have here is a good one. Many who leave the pack have to return because they learn they can't make it out here in this world.

I've not only survived, I've thrived. I have more than I ever thought was possible for me right now, yet I still long for the connection to my roots. I look forward to my monthly conversations with Callie. The old Seer has kept me up to date with random tidbits of pack life and been a wonderful support to me from afar. I love her dearly. I consider calling her tonight, but it's late and I don't want to wake her. I fix my cup of tea and pick up my phone. There's only one person in my life who can fully understand what I'm going through: my dad.

He answers on the first ring.

"Hey, sweetheart, what's going on? How's my grandbaby?"

I laugh and curl up in my chair with my phone and my mug. "She's causing trouble, as usual," I joke. "Poor Susan looked ready to bolt when I got home. How are things with you?"

My dad's laugh echoes from the phone, and I settle in to listen as he tells me about his work in the city, and the people he's met recently. He's always sure to pass on tidbits of pack news that he's come across. I encourage him to share the information he comes across in the secret hope that one day, he might tell me how Austin is. But he never does. I hear about weddings, babies being born, deaths, and even battles, but not Austin. My father may have left the pack years ago, but he's still connected to his friends. The memories of his mate, my late mother, were just too entrenched on our pack lands for him to stay. It was far less painful for him to live away.

"Did you hear the news about the peace accords with the Highland Pack?" he asks, suddenly.

I blink in surprise, stirring my tea before answering. “No.”

There was a time when I thought peace with the Highland Pack would be impossible.

My father clears his throat.

“Oh, well, there was an agreement reached—between the Alphas,” he hedges.

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I'm curious. I want to ask if Austin was involved in helping to broker this peace deal. If it's true and the Highland Pack sticks to it, it will be a huge win for our entire pack, and for Austin.

"What kind of deal was reached?" I ask, hoping he'll give me the information I seek without me having to directly ask for it.

He's silent for a minute. "It's Alpha business, I'm sure more information will come out once it's finalized," he says, finally.

I feel like my father might be hiding something from me, but I don't push it. It's getting late and my tea is cold.

"Good night, Dad," I say, with a yawn. Once the call is disconnected, I start my own nighttime routine.

Just as I'm finishing washing my face, I hear an ear-splitting yell coming from Cleo's room.

"Mama!" Cleo shrieks.

Face still wet, I run, my skin tingling with protective instincts.

"What is it? What happened?" I ask, scanning the room. Cleo is sobbing, sitting in the middle of her bed with her face buried in her knees.

"Sweet girl," I exclaim, rushing to her side. "Tell Mama what's wrong."

“I had a bad dream,” she sniffs, looking up at me with tear-filled eyes. “There were a bunch of wolves howling and then I saw a dead body. An old woman with a pretty blue necklace. She was lying on the bed and everyone around her was crying!”

I exhale slowly and draw her into my arms. “Oh, sweetheart. That sounds so scary!” I murmur, pressing a kiss into her hair. “But it was just a dream. You’re safe. I promise. Nothing can hurt you here.”

She sobs into my chest and I brush my hand down her back in soothing circles. It’s not the first time Cleo has woken up to bad dreams. All children have them from time to time. But this one was far more detailed than the others. I kiss her on the forehead and hold her close.

When she’s finally quieted her sobs to only a soft hiccup, I pull her into my arms and walk over to the rocking chair. She curls up in my arms and rests her head on my shoulder as I rock her, singing her the songs from our pack until she drifts back off to sleep.

There’s nothing in this world I wouldn’t do to protect my daughter.

Chapter Twelve

Yelena

I’m still thinking about Cleo’s dream while I’m working on patient charts. An old woman with a blue necklace. It’s such an odd detail to remark on, and yet it seems so familiar.

“Ms. Croft, ma’am, you have a visitor out front. He says it’s urgent.” I turn to look at her. In order to keep my privacy, I’ve shortened my last name to something less memorable and harder to find. But even after five years, hearing it still gives me

pause.

My brow crinkles with confusion as I follow Brenda, our receptionist, out to the main lobby. I don't have many friends here, and none that I can think of who would come see me at work.

"Dad?" I ask, surprised.

"I'm sorry to bother you here, Yelena," he replies, his face drawn with sorrow. "But I had to let you know. It's about Callie."

Icy cold fear worms its way into my heart.

"Brenda, we're going into exam room two," I say, ushering my dad with me. We duck into the unused room and I sit down.

"What happened?" I ask quietly.

He paces next to the exam bed before glancing at me. "She died last night, surrounded by her pack."

My heart plummets and I close my eyes, trying to withstand the wave of grief that hits me. Callie was more than just our pack's Seer. To me, she was family. She practically raised me and she was one of the few people that I felt like I could honestly confide in. Only last week, we had spoken briefly on the phone. Callie had told me she was tired, and that she was going to go to bed early. There was nothing to indicate that she had been ill.

Did she know that would be the last time we spoke? Was that her way of telling me goodbye?

My heart hurts and her loss feels excruciatingly painful—almost as bad as the guilt that suddenly invades my mind.

She loved you like family too, yet you weren't there. You didn't get to say goodbye.

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“The Farewell Ritual. When is it?” I ask, stiffly.

My father purses his lips. “It’s this weekend.”

I swallow hard. I don’t think I have a choice. I need to go back. To miss saying goodbye to Callie in the Farewell Ritual would be...unthinkable.

“There’s more,” my father says gently. “It’s about Austin.”

My breath catches in my throat and I study his face. “What about Austin?” I ask faintly.

“He’s...” my father sighs and grips the back of his neck, “he’s promised...to another...woman.”

I stare at him blankly as my brain processes that information. “He’s chosen another mate?”

My father nods. “After you left, he mourned for a long time, but he has responsibilities to the pack.”

I hold up my hand and stop him. “I get it. Everyone moves on. It will be fine.”

The words feel wooden in my mouth. Unnatural. Painful.

Austin with another woman? Austin mated to another. I never thought this day would come.

My heart pangs with more loss and my wolf cries from the pain. Being separated from Austin has been hard on both of us, but to know that he has moved on like this?

It hurts more than I could have imagined. I take a deep breath, and then another, willing myself to find the calm I need to get through this. My father looks at me with sympathy in his eyes.

Pull yourself together, Yelena. You have to be strong. For Cleo and for Callie.

I try to shove the troubling and painful thoughts away, imagining taking my feelings and placing them in a box before turning the lock. Some days I wish I could turn my emotions on or off like a light switch. Since I can't, the next best thing is to put them aside. It's better for me if I don't think about things like this.

"Are you going to bring Cleo?" my father asks softly. That gives me pause. As much as I would love to show Cleo her roots and let her experience life with a pack, I can't risk it.

"No," I say decisively. "I'll have Susan watch her. It's a short trip for the ritual. She'll be fine."

My father opens his mouth as if to say something, but then closes it, thinking better of it.

"Whatever you think is best," he says with a sigh. "But she's going to find out about her...heritage...eventually."

I know he's right. But I can't handle that problem today. Not when I'm still processing the fact that Callie is dead. Not when I have to go back to the pack and face seeing Austin with another woman.

Later. I'll deal with that later.

The drive back to the pack territory is a long one. I haven't slept well these days in anticipation of my return. Now, it feels like every bend of the road brings back new memories. The thick green forest is unchanged and my wolf howls in my chest in recognition of the land we used to call home. Out of respect for the tradition of our pack, I quietly sent word ahead to the Luna that I would be coming. As a pack member, I have the right to return at any time, but coming back like this feels awkward.

Anxiety courses through me as I make my way to the Alpha's residence. I've been gone so long, I don't know how I'll be received. You left their son. You better be prepared for pushback, I remind myself.

I park the car in the visitor parking area and slowly make my way up to the familiar white house with the black shutters. The dahlias out front are in full bloom. The scent of them takes me back to happier times when Austin and I were just kids playing chase in the garden.

He's not yours anymore, I remind myself.

The guard at the door nods at me respectfully as I make my way up the steps and onto the Alpha and Luna's front porch. It's a good sign that they are expecting me. I hope.

Nervously, I rap my knuckles against the shiny red door. My heart is pounding in my chest. As the door creaks open, Luna Elizabeth's face comes into view.

"Yelena!" she greets me, her warm brown eyes lighting up. "It's so good to see you."

She steps aside and welcomes me into her home. I step over the threshold, the familiar scent of coffee and old books enveloping me.

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The memories flood back even stronger, threatening to drown me.

I force a smile onto my face and accept her hug.

“Thank you, Luna,” I say respectfully.

“None of that, Yelena. I’ve known you since you were a pup, and no matter what, I’ll always think of you as a daughter.”

Her words tug at my heartstrings.

“Come, say hello to Alpha, and then I’ll take you over to Callie,” she says briskly.

I nod and follow her as she leads me into the sitting room where Alpha Malaki is sitting in an old worn chair.

His eyes soften slightly when he sees me, but there’s marked sadness there too. He stands as I enter and holds out his hand toward me.

“Yelena,” he says, his voice tight with emotion. “It’s been too long.”

We shake hands, a formal greeting that feels alien now.

“Alpha,” I respond, my voice barely holding steady. “Thank you for allowing me back to attend the Farewell Rite.”

He waves his hand and motions me toward the couch.

“I would never keep you away, Yelena,” he says softly, “We’re your pack. Your family.”

So many conflicting emotions rise in me that I can’t speak, I can only nod.

I knew coming back here would be challenging, but I didn’t think it would be because they were going to welcome me back so warmly.

“Are you well? Tell us about your life in the human city,” he booms. Luna Elizabeth comes to perch on the edge of his chair, and she smiles at me. “Your father said you’re a nurse. That’s wonderful!”

I nod. “Yes. I have found a lot of joy in nursing. I’ve found my training as a healer here has aided me in my studies in the human world,” I tell them. At least talking about work feels easier.

“You do your pack proud,” Alpha Malaki praises, causing me to flush scarlet.

“Dad, Mom? Are you home?”

The familiar voice echoes through the house, freezing me in place. I know that voice as well as my own. I’ll always know it.

Austin.

The Alpha and Luna exchange a glance before nodding at me reassuringly.

“In here, son,” Luna Elizabeth calls out.

I take a deep breath and try to prepare myself, but when he walks through the door, it’s like being hit in the face.

Nothing could have prepared me for seeing him again. He looks...good. Better than good, actually. He looks great. My wolf perks up immediately, overjoyed to see him. I can feel her intentions pushing against mine, begging me to go over and greet our mate.

He's not ours anymore, I remind her, forcing myself to ignore her whines.

My appearance is also a surprise to him because he sees me and stops in his tracks. A muffled "ow" from behind him breaks the silence.

"Austin? Austin, baby...why did you stop?" The high-pitched whine makes my skin crawl.

A tall, beautiful woman appears in the doorway. She's dressed simply in a fitted white dress that accentuates her figure, her blonde hair tumbling down in loose waves over her shoulders. She looks every bit the Luna, radiating grace and poise.

She's stunning.

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I can't stop myself from looking down at my jeans and T-shirt. I've never been glamorous before, and I'm certainly not now.

"Oh, hi. I didn't know you had company," she says, staring directly at me.

"This is Yelena." Austin's voice is a low drawl that resonates in every corner of my being. It brings back a tsunami of memories that I've spent years trying to forget.

"Hi," I croak.

"Hi, I'm Sylvie. Austin's intended mate," she says, brightly. I don't miss the way she steps into him, resting her hand on his chest.

The large diamond catches the light, sending rainbows all over the room.

"It's nice to meet you," I say quietly.

Sylvie's smile doesn't reach her eyes as she takes my extended hand. "Likewise."

She turns her attention back to Austin, who still seems to be recovering from the shock of seeing me here. His silver eyes are filled with unreadable emotions.

Austin clears his throat, looking uncomfortable. "Are you..." he starts, then seems to change his mind about whatever he was going to ask. "How have you been?"

"Good," I respond curtly. The tension in the room feels oppressive.

My eyes involuntarily flicker between Austin and Sylvie, studying them.

He hasn't changed much. His hair is slightly longer now, curling around his ears. He's put on some more muscle.

But he's still Austin. Just no longer my Austin.

"I should get over to Callie's before too long. I want to sit with her before the Farewell Rite."

Luna Elizabeth rises and comes over to me, pulling me into a tight hug.

"She loved you, never forget that," she whispers in my ear. Tears well in my eyes, and I sniffle and nod.

"Thank you, Luna," I whisper.

I look up to see Sylvia glaring at me. There's something about her that makes me deeply uncomfortable.

But, with any luck, I won't have to interact with her much. I'm not here for drama, or Austin. I'm here for Callie. To honor her life and send her off.

"The house should be open. You can go right in," Austin says. "I can walk you over there."

There's an unreadable emotion in his eyes. My wolf perks up, but I push her back and give him a watery smile instead. "Thank you, but I remember the way. If you'll excuse me, I'll be going. You enjoy your visit with your folks."

He steps aside, and I hurry past him, brushing my elbow against his in my haste. The

familiar jolt of intense attraction hits me like lightning through my veins. I had hoped the physical reactions I have always experienced around him would have mellowed with time, but they feel stronger than ever. I exhale sharply and walk faster.

I don't breathe easy again until I'm outside and halfway down the path to the Seer's house.

Chapter Thirteen

Austin

The courtyard is busy with members of the pack setting up for the Farewell Rite. I scan the crowd, looking for Yelena.

My mother told me she stayed the night at Callie's house last night and insisted on being part of the preparations. But I would have thought she'd have come out and joined the rest of the pack by now.

"You'd think she'd at least make an effort to dress up for the Farewell Rite. Showing up here looking like trash was a choice," Sylvie sniffs, running her hand over the skirt of her dress.

I glance over at her and frown.

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She rolls her eyes. “Oh, you really think she looked good? There were holes in her jeans, Austin. She showed up here after how long and she didn’t even have the respect to dress well? Honestly, I don’t know what you ever saw in her. Good thing you upgraded!”

She leans in to press her lips to my cheek, but I turn away. The way she’s talking about Yelena and her clothing from yesterday rankles with me.

“What?” she asks, pouting. “It’s true.”

“You’re being rude,” I say firmly. “Yelena’s here to mourn. What she’s wearing doesn’t fuck matter.”

Sylvie narrows her eyes and crosses her arms. “Why are you defending her? She left you.”

“My former relationship with Yelena is none of your concern. That was in the past. What matters is that she is still a part of our pack. Even though she left, this is still her home. You will treat her with respect.”

Sylvie gasps and looks at me with shock. “Austin...”

I hold up my hand and stop her. “I don’t want to hear another word. Go make yourself useful. It looks like they need help set up the food tables.”

“I am Alpha-born. Do you understand that?” she sneers, “They serve me. Not the other way around.” Her eyes flash and I feel my irritation grow.

“You may be Alpha-born, Sylvie, but I’m the future Alpha of this pack. You will do as I ask, or you can leave and not be part of this ceremony. Tell me what your choice is. Now.” I snarl back.

She glares at me, and we’re locked in a tense standoff. Finally, she looks down.

“I don’t need to take this kind of disrespect,” she hisses. “You can be sure my father will hear about this and the shameful way you’re treating me.”

She flounces off, and I sigh, rubbing my eyes. Great. Another problem. Just what I need. I think back to when Yelena was by my side. Situations like this would never have happened. Yelena was nothing but kind to any member of our pack or visitors. She had a sort of grace about her, an air of helpfulness and hospitality that made her the perfect choice for a future Luna. I sigh and close my eyes, willing my thoughts down a less dangerous path.

Whether I like it or not, I’m not with Yelena. I’m with Sylvie. The relationship is...complicated, but the peace we’ve achieved with the Highland Pack depends on it.

It’s simple enough: I marry Sylvie, and they sign the Peace Accord.

My father and her father have worked on this deal for ages. When my father presented it to me, I accepted.

“It’s for the good of the pack. Marrying Sylvie will unite our territories for the first time in decades,” he had said.

Neither of us is under any delusion that this deal doesn’t benefit the Highland Pack greatly. They have been after our territory for years. But peace is peace.

I stare off toward the road where Yelena disappeared a while ago. Seeing her again is

bringing up all sorts of emotions for me and for my wolf. It's a desperate sort of feeling, one of hope, fear, and desire. The last time I felt this, it was when I watched her disappear from my life. It makes my chest hurt just thinking about that terrible day. My skin is crawling with the need to be near her.

Vincent wanders over, giving me a long glance.

"That looked intense," he remarks, nudging my shoulder. I grimace at him but don't answer. Vincent is well aware of the fact that Sylvie and I aren't a love match. We tolerate each other, each doing our duty, but that's it. The tension between us is easy enough to read by people who know me.

"Yelena's back," he continues quietly. "That has to feel weird."

Weird hardly covers it.

On one hand, my wolf is practically jumping out of my chest, desperate to see her, scent her, and just be near her. It's been so long since I've been around Yelena, I had almost forgotten what it felt like to have our wolves in sync.

When I'm with Sylvie, my wolf is quiet. No excitement, no yearning—we just...exist.

"I guess I never thought about what it would be like when—if—she came back," I say, turning to my beta. "She left, and that was the end of it. But now that she's back...yeah. It does feel weird."

Vincent gives me a sympathetic nod. "Have you talked to her much?" he asks.

I shake my head. The brief conversation we had at my parents' place was awkward, largely because of Sylvie.

“No. She isn’t here for me. She’s here to pay her respects to Callie.”

Vincent stands silently next to me, staring off into the trees as we both are lost in our thoughts.

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I miss her.

It's hard to admit to myself, but it's true.

"You should find her," Vincent says, finally. He turns to me and claps his hand on my back. "Clear the air. Find out what you need to know. This is an opportunity Austin, for closure...or whatever else you might need. As your friend, I advise you to take it. You never know if you'll get another chance."

He walks off, whistling a jaunty tune, leaving me with even more complicated emotions and thoughts.

Another chance. The words echo in my brain over and over again. Is that what I want?

My wolf howls in my chest, his pain lacing through me.

In the years Yelena has been gone, he's been quieter. Our connection has been strained. I thought his grief would pass eventually, but it never did. I was eventually able to put my own feelings aside and focus on my ever-growing pack duties, but to my wolf? Our mate was gone.

Nothing would ever change that.

When I accepted the engagement to Sylvie, he refused to acknowledge it. For the first time in my adult life, I had to force myself to shift so that she and I could run together as wolves.

Our engagement may be settled according to our packs, but my wolf wants nothing to do with it. I kick at a pebble on the ground in frustration.

What if you never feel anything ever again? What if she's the only one who brings out your wolf and makes you feel complete? What if she's the only woman you've ever loved? Can you really go through the rest of your life without feeling that again?

I think about that for a moment, and the realization hits me so hard that I actually stagger backward from the intensity. I know that my wolf needs Yelena in our life, but so do I. I miss the little things, like coming home after work and seeing her working in the kitchen or waving to me from the front porch. The way she smiles up at the sun when she reads on the porch. The scent of her shampoo in our shower.

I miss her. Living without her has been a sort of half-life, and I can't go on like this. A future without her just feels bleak. The last time I truly felt happy going home was in the weeks right before she left.

I have to fix this.

I can't spend the rest of my life feeling nothing, ignoring my wolf, and just....existing.

My wolf swells in my chest, urging me to go to her, and finally remedy what I broke so many years ago.

I give in to the urge and take off down the road at a light jog.

With any luck, I'll catch Yelena at Callie's house and maybe we'll be able to speak privately.

For the first time in years, my chest feels a little lighter, like there's hope again. A

small sliver of sunshine on a cloudy day.

I wave to my fellow packmates as I pass them down the dirt road on my way to Callie's place. With each step I take, I feel my heart expanding.

This is the right choice.

I know it. And so does my wolf.

Just as I reach Callie's driveway, I sense her. My wolf perks up, anxious for our reunion. I still haven't figured out what I want to say to her and how I am going to fix this, but I go to unlatch the gate and make my way up the small brick walkway.

It's quiet over here. Callie preferred to live slightly away from the main pack. The large trees provide shade over the tiny front porch. I smile slightly when I see the empty rocking chairs. I'd spent many an afternoon sitting next to her, rocking on those chairs.

"May you be at peace, Callie," I whisper into the wind.

A loud bang disrupts the silence, and I stop, suddenly alert. Soft footsteps pound the dirt behind the house. Quickly, I round the corner, and I see Yelena flying down the path toward the forest. She glances over her shoulder, and I'm taken aback by her expression.

She looks terrified.

Before I can say anything or do anything, I watch as she leaps into her shift and heads into the woods.

All of my senses are going haywire. What could possibly have spooked her? I debate

what to do. Finally, I move to where she has shifted, and gather her clothes, before shifting myself and following her. My wolf and I have a profound need to know that she's okay. By following her, I can protect her.

I move through the woods at a light jog, following her scent. She's upset with me, but I refuse to allow anything to harm her. Not now. Not ever.

Chapter Fourteen

Yelena

Stepping back onto Nightwing Pack land was difficult. But walking into Callie's home and knowing she's gone? That felt like a knife to the heart. I glance around the small cottage, and a wave of memories cascade over me.

The scarred kitchen table where she and I spent many a happy morning, preparing food together and laughing.

The threadbare but cozy couch in the living room where she taught me how to mix spices together and create poultices.

Even the heavy bookshelves, stuffed with books, journals, and little trinkets all hold memories for me.

This small cottage was once my haven, and without Callie, it feels empty.

I wipe a tear from my eye and move toward the bedroom. As per our custom, Callie's body will have been prepared for the ritual by the Elders and honored pack members. I take a deep breath before entering the room.

On a basic level, I know what to expect. Her body will have been cleaned and laid out in her best dress. Special herbs and amulets will have been placed on her body, each representing an offering or a blessing. A single candle will have been left burning, alongwith incense, to cleanse the space and pave the way for her soul to move to the

next plane.

I know this in my head, but my heart aches at the thought of seeing Callie in this state. These rites have been passed down through our pack for centuries. It's how we honor our dead and return them to the Moon Goddess's protection.

But my heart still aches with loss.

Steeling myself, I push open the door and inhale the familiar scent of herbs and incense. The curtains are drawn, allowing the afternoon sun to filter through the room.

There she is. Laid out on the bed in her favorite green dress, with sage at her feet and a moonstone pendant resting on her chest. She looks peaceful. Serene, even. Her eyes are closed, and from the doorway, she looks as if she has simply gone to sleep and will wake up at any moment now.

I approach the bed slowly, almost reverently, my footfalls muffled by the thick rug covering the wooden floor.

Sobs rip through my body as I kneel down beside her. I reach out a trembling hand to touch her, but then I hesitate.

Finally, I let my fingers gently brush the back of her hand. It's cool and so very still. My breath comes in shudders as I press my forehead to our intertwined hands.

"Oh, Callie," I whisper, my voice choked with tears. "I'm so sorry I wasn't here to say goodbye."

I look around, noting the small details of grief. The intricately carved wolf figurine tucked next to her palm, a tribute to our pack and her unwavering loyalty. The sprigs

of lavendersprinkled around her. Callie always said lavender kept away evil spirits.

“You were so loved,” I whisper, touching the small bunches of herbs that lie on the floor next to me. “I hope you knew that.”

On the table beside the bed sat a simple clay bowl, brimming with water and a beeswax candle. I carefully reach over to light the candle, brushing against the bowl. A single moonflower floats on the surface, a symbol of the Moon Goddess’ blessings.

It gives me a small sort of peace. The knowledge that this ritual is for her. A final gift as thanks for the knowledge, care, and love she has given me throughout the years.

I light my candle and place it in the holder before repeating the words that Callie herself taught me years ago.

Daughter of the Moon, your Spirit is now free.

Guided by her Light; run with the stars

Through the shadow of the Forest;

With the whispers of the Wind;

At each rising Moon, your wisdom I’ll seek.

My voice trembles with emotion at first, but gains strength as I offer these final rites. I dip my fingers into the water and let the drops fall upon Callie’s body. Each droplet is a prayer. A memory.

A goodbye.

My heart is full of emotions, but I finish the chant and sit, my gaze fixated on the flickering light of the candle.

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I let the silence take over and simply sit with her. One last time.

After what feels like an eternity, as the candle burns low, casting flickering shadows across the wall, I stand and make my way toward the door. My foot catches on a wooden box sticking partially out from under the bed. I fall forward, catching myself on my knees.

The lid to the box is partially open and I recognize it. It's Callie's memento box. When I was a child, she used to show this to me whenever I was sad, telling me great, fantastical stories about the items.

I trace my finger along the edge, feeling grief ride me hard.

Her old tarot deck. A pressed fern leaf. Old photographs and trinkets from days past, they are all in this box.

Carefully, I put the lid back on and go to slide it back under the bed, when I see a pale green envelope on the ground. I pull it out and freeze.

It's addressed to me. In Callie's familiar, elegant handwriting.

Slowly, I look around the room. My hands tremble as I open it.

My dearest Yelena,

Our time together was one of the greatest joys of my life. If you are reading this, it is because I have returned to the embrace of our Mother Moon Goddess. Please, do not

grieve me too hard, child. I have lived a wonderful life.

Of my meager belongings, I have left you the cornflower blue vase on the kitchen counter. When you were small, you used to bring me the most beautiful wildflowers to place in that vase. It is my hope that your own child will do the same for you. The moonstone ring that I wore during ceremonies is also yours.

May it bring you peace and joy in the difficult days to come. You, my dearest girl, have been honored by the Moon Goddess. She has blessed your house with a Gift.

Your daughter has been chosen as the next Seer. You must protect her, guide her in our ways. My journals will help you teach her to master her Gift. But know that among the humans, she is in danger. Her abilities are only just beginning. Once they manifest, even casual touches between her friends could wreak havoc. She will be a strong Seer. She must learn how to control her powers at the earliest opportunity. Life in the city will be hard, if not impossible, for her. If she were to accidentally reveal her abilities, the consequences could be deadly.

Take heed, my dearest. You must keep her safe, above all.

With love,

Callie.

I read the letter twice, trying to make sense of the words I see on the paper. Cleo is the next Seer?

She can't be. That can't be right.

But Callie had no reason to lie and she wouldn't, anyway. Not to me. Not about something like this.

My heart starts to pound, and icy fear churns in my gut. Her warnings are clear.

She's in danger. Her abilities are only beginning. The consequences could be deadly.

A shiver runs through me, and I set the letter aside. The room suddenly feels colder. The stories that Callie used to tell me come flooding back. Powerful Seers, gifted with visions and foresight by the Moon Goddess herself, are highly respected, and highly coveted. To have a Seer is a great honor...and an advantage.

Tears prick my eyes and I start to panic. How can it be that Cleo, my sweet, innocent child, has this Gift? It seems much too heavy of a burden to place on a child. All I ever wanted for her was a simple, happy life. One where she could be safe and free. This burden is not what I would have chosen for her. I know all too well the burden a blessing like this can have on a child.

"Callie, what will I do?" I whisper, my breath shaky.

If she can't live among the humans, I'll have to leave my job to keep her safe. But where will I go? What will I do?

You'll have to come back home. Raise her in the pack. For her own protection.

The thought makes me shiver again. Raising her here means I'll have to tell Austin. I can't do that, not when he's about to ascend to Alpha and take Sylvie as his Luna. The timing is all wrong.

Why have you chosen her, Moon Goddess? Why would you put this burden on her?

All I have is questions, and it's making my chest feel too tight. My wolf is pacing too, her anxiety feeding my own.

What if a rival pack learns about her? The Highland Pack—would they try to steal her? Would they try to use her Gift?

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Suddenly, Callie's house feels claustrophobic, and I have to get out. I stumble to my feet, crashing through the room toward the back door.

It's up to me to protect Cleo, it always has been and always will be. But right now, I need to run.

Maybe in my wolf form, this will make sense.

With my eyes on the forest, I jog out of the house, shifting as soon as I'm near the tree line.

Chapter Fifteen

Yelena

I run as fast as I can, darting down the familiar paths. My wolf stretches out, eager to explore the area we used to love. We race through the underbrush, paws pounding against the ground, thudding in rhythm with the frantic beat of my heart.

The wind whistles past as we duck branches and leap over logs. It's a potent sense of freedom that I've been missing in my time away. Despite everything, running like this, reconnecting with my wolf, it feels good.

But all too soon, the exhilaration fades, replaced with the grim reminder of reality.

Cleo.

I skid to a stop under a tree, my mind racing back to her. This time of day, she's probably badgering Susan into giving her a snack before dinner, blissfully oblivious to the fact that she has been chosen by the Goddess herself.

I feel the panic prickling at my skin again, but this time, it's coupled with fierce determination.

I have to protect her. I will do whatever it takes.

A twig snaps in the forest, and I jerk my head up, sniffing the wind for signs of an intruder. Austin steps forward, shifting from his big black wolf into his human form as easily as breathing. My breath catches in my throat as I look at his body. The last time I saw him naked was the night we made love in our cottage. The last five years have been good to him. He's put on more muscle and he carries himself with the confidence of a man who has grown into himself. He's beautiful. And not mine anymore.

He's carrying a small bundle in his hands, and he lays it in front of me.

"Hello, Yelena," he says softly.

I look down, sniffing the bundle and realize he's brought clothes to me.

I shift back, grabbing the clothes, and turn my back to him to pull them on.

"What are you doing here? Why did you follow me?" I ask once I'm fully dressed.

I'm relieved to see he's pulled on a pair of shorts as well.

"You looked upset leaving Callie's," he says evasively. "I was worried about you."

The idea of Austin being worried about me makes a hidden part of my heart tingle, but I brush it aside.

"I don't need your concern," I reply, my voice sharper than intended. But Austin doesn't flinch. Quite the opposite. He smiles gently at me.

"I know you don't." He steps closer, and for a moment, the shadows from the sun and the trees frame him, tall and protective. My heart twinges again.

"But you have it, anyway."

I swallow hard and look away, struggling to reconcile the man standing before me with the Austin I've known. You have it anyway.

I shiver and try to make sense of it all. This isn't the Austin I remember. When we were together, it was always me who gave support, not him. I can't remember a single time when Austin went out of his way to comfort me when I was upset. Has he really changed that much?

"I'm fine," I say, although it is far from the truth. But this isn't something I can involve him in, not yet. Not until I've figured things out.

"Are you sure?" he asks, his gaze steady on me.

"Yes," I reply tersely, turning away from him and toward the forest, wrapping my arms around myself.

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Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:05 am

"Yelena," he says softly, pulling me out of my reverie. His gaze is intense as he looks at me. There is a weight in his eyes that makes my stomach flutter.

"Tell me about your life. What's it like living in the city?"

I exhale and look away. What can I possibly tell him? I've spent years building a life that doesn't involve him. That he can't know about.

Still, at least talking about this will distract him from what happened at Callie's.

"I'm a nurse. It's good work. I get to help people every day. I'm good at that," I say softly.

He smiles at me and then moves over to the large rock next to the tree, hopping up on it and sitting down. He pats the spot next to him, inviting me to join him, but I hesitate.

"I bet you're excellent at nursing. You've always been so compassionate," he says.

I can't help but soften at his words. They sound so...genuine.

I blink back tears, surprised at my sudden onslaught of emotions. It's been so long since I've heard such praise, especially from him. For a moment, I want to let everything out, pour my fears and worries into his ears and seek comfort.

But I can't. I have to keep Cleo safe.

“Thank you,” I murmur, choosing to stay standing. His gaze remains on me, soft and patient. It's almost unbearable. Who is this version of Austin? And where was he when I needed him five years ago?

Austin seems to feel it too, as he turns to look at me, his expression contemplative. “Do you miss this?” he asks, gesturing toward the forest with a sweep of his hand.

I pause before answering, drinking in our surroundings: the tall trees, the smell of the pinecones that litter the forest floor, the distant sound of the babbling brook.

“Of course I do,” I whisper.

Reluctantly, I move to sit next to him on the rock. The action feels so familiar and comforting. It ignites a bittersweet ache in my chest. We're close enough to touch and yet...the divide between us feels deeper than ever.

We sit in silence for a moment, the sounds of the forest enveloping us. I can hear the rustling of leaves against each other, the chirping of distant birds, the sighing wind through the trees. It's peaceful, and for a fleeting moment, I let myself forget about my worries.

I'm home. Here on pack lands. With Austin. It feels like...home.

"It must be hard, though," Austin says after a while, "to live among humans. Not have the Pack."

I look at him, surprised at his words. He's looking straight ahead, seemingly lost in thought.

"It was hard," I admit quietly. "At first. But then...I adapted."

His gaze flickers to me, and he nods thoughtfully. "I can't imagine it. Not feeling the pull of the moon every night...not having the surrounding pack."

The words hang in the air, heavy and poignant. They tug at my heart, a reminder of what we once were—what we once had. I turn my gaze back to the forest in front of us, swallowing down the lump in my throat.

"I didn't say it was easy," I correct him gently. "It was...lonely. But when you're alone, you figure things out."

He meets my gaze again, and there's something there that I can't decipher. Regret, maybe? "Like what?"

I shrug. "Like who you are without all of this." I gesture vaguely to the surrounding trees.

His eyes flicker with something unreadable and he looks away, out into the forest we used to roam together. "You know...you can always come home. The pack would welcome you back," he swallows hard and turns to me. "I would welcome you back."

I stare at him, the moment charged with tension. A bitter laugh escapes my lips before I can control it, and he looks away.

If only he knew the choices, I am facing right now.

"Unless you have a reason to stay with the humans, of course," he adds, brushing the pine needles off his shorts. "Do you have a mate among them?"

I blush and look away. The last thing I want to do is discuss my dating life with Austin.

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“Are you ready for your ascension to Alpha?” I ask, avoiding the question. “The ceremony will be soon. Once you’ve completed your mating to...Sylvie.”

“I think I am as ready as I’ll ever be,” he says abruptly. “I’ve trained under my father for years. The transition should be smooth, with minimal disruption to the pack. Will you stay for the ceremony?”

The idea of watching Austin complete the mating ceremony with Sylvie and take his rightful place as Alpha of our pack with her by his side actually makes me feel physically ill.

But I can’t deny him this. I’m not strong enough to resist it. So, even though I know it will hurt, I nod my head.

“I’d be glad to be there for you,” I say softly. “You’ll make an excellent Alpha, Austin. I’ve always known that. And Sylvie, she will be a good Luna.”

Austin coughs. “Perhaps. But she doesn’t come to the role as naturally as you did, and my parents haven’t warmed up to her yet.” He elbows me, and I look over at him in surprise. “I think they’ve always held out hope that you’d come back.”

I look away. It does us no good to talk like that. Not with things the way they are.

“Do you ever think about when we were kids?” he asks suddenly.

I blink at the change of conversation, but I give him a small smile. “Sometimes. We had so many adventures in these woods.”

He brightens and nods. "That time we ran all the way to the waterfalls and then got lost coming home. My father was so mad at me."

I raise my eyebrows. "Why? It's not like we left pack lands. He met us at the gate, and he gave me some snacks since I was so hungry. He didn't seem angry at all!"

He turns to me in surprise. "He was mad because I could have hurt you. You could have been injured because of my irresponsible behavior."

I think about that for a moment. I knew the Alpha and Luna were fond of me, but I had no idea that my safety had been such a high priority for them when Austin and I were kids.

"I had no idea," I admit, toeing my foot in the dirt.

"They've always adored you," Austin adds.

"It was hard to leave them. They are a good Alpha and Luna pair. They lead us well," I say.

Something in his expression softens. For a moment, I wonder if there is an understanding in him that wasn't there before.

"I never knew you felt so conflicted about leaving," he says quietly, almost to himself. There's an odd regret in his tone that throws me off balance again.

My gaze flickers to his face before I return to staring at the darkness of the forest. "Not everything is meant to be shared," I reply cryptically. "Some wounds are better left untouched."

"Maybe," Austin says. I sense him shifting next to me on the rock, turning his body

toward mine. "But perhaps sharing could've made the burden easier for both of us."

It's an unexpected level of honesty from Austin, and the pull I feel toward him seems stronger than ever.

He's so close. My wolf is desperate for us to touch, brush hands, anything. I look down at his lips for a moment, wondering for a brief second what it would feel like if he kissed me again.

But the image of Sylvie sneering at me earlier pops into my mind.

He's not mine. I gave him up and moved on. He's promised to Sylvie. I have to accept that.

I exhale and look away.

"I think we've both carried our burdens long enough," I say, forcing an impartial tone. "It's time to move on."

"I agree," Austin replies, his voice quiet yet firm. "That includes finding happiness."

My heart clenches at his words. I look at him sharply and see that he is still looking out at the forest, his expression unreadable.

"Happiness..." I repeat softly, a sad smile on my face. That seems like a concept so far removed from the reality I'm being forced to accept. Ever since we were paired, I've associated happiness with him.

"Yes," Austin says, turning to look at me again. His gaze is intense, filled with emotions I can't quite decipher. "You deserve it, you know. We both do."

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He sighs and looks away. "It's funny, you know," he says. "But the happiest times in my life are the moments I've spent with you."

"I..." I start but then close my mouth. What can I say to that? Do I even believe it myself? What does it even mean?

"We should probably head back," I mutter, breaking the silence that had settled between us. I can feel his gaze on me, but I do not meet his eyes.

"Yelena, wait," he whispers, reaching out to touch my arm. An electric jolt shoots through me at his touch, and my wolf howls within my chest.

I look down at his hand and then up at his face.

His eyes look wild with need and emotion, and it confuses me. What does he want from me? How can he look at me like this?

"What is it?" I ask, breathless. I couldn't move, even if I wanted to. Not right now. I'm captured in his spell.

He reaches over slowly, cupping my cheek with his large, warm hand. A shiver moves down my spine, and I bite my lip. My heart is pounding wildly in my chest, and anticipation coils tightly within me.

He takes a deep breath, his hand still cradling my cheek. His thumb brushes comforting circles over my skin and it's making me feel out of control.

When he leans toward me, I freeze. Is this happening right now?

The first brush of his lips against mine feels like white hot fire spreading through my veins. It awakens something deep in my soul, and I can't resist it.

My body responds instinctively, and I lean into him. His fingers tangle in my hair, pulling me closer. The heat of his mouth against mine, the way his body feels hard and warm against me, it's everything. It makes me forget everything else.

I forget Sylvie. I forget the pack. I forget our impending separation, the ceremony, everything. All that matters is here; this moment, this connection.

I gasp at the intensity of his kiss, and he takes advantage, deepening the kiss until I'm dizzy.

I moan when his free hand anchors onto me, wrapping around my waist to pull me flush against him. Every single contact point between us sends waves of pleasure through me, making me feel alive in a way I haven't felt for a long time.

Suddenly, he pulls away, and my heart stutters as if missing a beat. The loss of his touch and warmth throws me off balance.

He looks at me as if he's trying to read into my soul. For a moment, I had let my guard down and let him see everything. The sorrow, the longing, and yes, even the glint of desire and love that I still have for him.

"Yelena..." he whispers again. His voice is a desperate plea, heavy with emotion and vulnerability. I break the gaze, hopping off the rock.

"We need to go," I say firmly. "We have the rest of the Rites to attend to."

My lips are still tingling when I shift, picking up my clothes in my mouth and heading toward the pack's lands. I don't wait for him, but he's soon running beside me. The tension between us is palpable, a visceral reminder of what we once had and what we can no longer have.

In my heart, I know I shouldn't have kissed him back, but the truth is, he's my mate. I couldn't have resisted him if I tried.

Chapter Sixteen

Austin

"May you rest in comfort, Callie," I whisper, walking into her small bedroom for the final time. The room is tidy. The steady stream of visitors that have come to pay their respects have all taken care not to disturb the peacefulness of Callie's home.

I look around the room, letting the weight of grief settle into me. Callie was a gift to our pack. She will be missed for a long, long time.

Just as I go to start my duties and prepare her body to be moved, I notice a letter on the end table. It's crumpled and half sticking out of the envelope.

I pick it up carefully and turn it over. My eyes widen when I see who it's addressed to.

Yelena.

Is this what caused her to run away so fearfully yesterday? I flip the paper back and forth in my hands.

On one hand, Yelena and Callie both deserve privacy. Reading a private letter would

be, at best rude, and at worst, a deeply inappropriate invasion of privacy.

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Except...the letter was left out. Anyone could see it. Anyone could read it. If it were meant to be kept private, wouldn't Yelena have taken it with her?

My curiosity is burning, and I carefully edge the paper out of the envelope. It's probably nothing. Maybe a sweet farewell letter from Callie to Yelena.

I start to read, and my heart almost stops beating.

Your daughter will be the next Seer.

Holy shit.

I read the words over and over, but each time they say the same thing.

Yelena has a child. A child she never mentioned it to me.

A myriad of emotions washes over me. Anger, betrayal, sadness. It's all jumbled in my mind. How could she not mention that she has a child? Is the child mine?

I think back to the night that Yelena and I were intimate. The only time. Depending on the age, her child could be mine. If that child is mine, how could Yelena keep her from me?

Am I ready to be a father?

My mind is swirling with questions. I want to go to Yelena and demand answers, but at the same time, I know I have to tread lightly. I can't afford to scare her off. Not

like this. I quickly stuff the letter back into the envelope and fold it, tucking it into my pants pocket for safekeeping. I quickly send a text off to my beta, Vincent, asking him to look into this. I need information, and I need it now.

The envelope in my pocket feels heavy and I'm struck with a feeling of gratitude that my duties brought me back here, alone, to find that letter.

A child Seer.

Callie was right to warn her of the dangers. If our rival packs knew about this, they would try to snatch the child out of our grasp. No wonder Yelena looked terrified when she left here.

Yelena will have to come home and raise the child here. Under the pack's protection. Whether Cleo is mine or not, I want them here. Under my protection.

There's simply no other option.

As the future Alpha, my duties for the Farewell Rite are extensive. I'm responsible for bringing Callie's body to the funeral pyre. I look over the body of Callie one more time, closing my eyes in a quick prayer, before carefully moving the amulets and trinkets to the side and wrapping her in the clean sheet.

Once she's wrapped up, I lift her, carrying her in my arms toward the door where my men are waiting with the platform that we will carry her on.

The mood is solemn as our warriors bow their heads in acknowledgment of our beloved Seer.

Gently, I lay her body on the platform and take my place at the head of it, lifting the heavy wood onto my shoulder.

We march down the main road toward the community area. Pack members wait outside their homes, paying tribute to Callie by both young and old.

When we arrive, I make eye contact with my father. He comes down from his seat with my mother and greets me, taking his place next to me as we finish the walk to the pyre.

Together, we slide the wooden plank onto the pyre and step back.

“You’ve done well, son,” my father whispers, giving me an approving nod. I manage a grim smile back, bowing slightly to show my respect, before marching to my place next to Sylvie.

She grimaces at me but stays quiet.

My father begins the rite and I watch the crowd. Many are weeping, and the occasional howl breaks through as our pack listens to their Alpha commit Callie back to the Moon Goddess. My eyes find Yelena in the back. She’s dressed in black and carrying a small basket of wildflowers. I can tell she’s not trying to draw attention to herself, but I can’t keep my eyes off her.

Knowing what I know now, I can understand the many layers of grief that are written across her face. The loss of her beloved confidant and friend, Callie, the knowledge that her child is in danger, the pain of being back here and feeling like she has to hide from her own family.

It would be a heavy burden for anyone to carry. My wolf demands that I go to her, offer her my support, and care for her, but the timing isn’t right. There are still so many questions that need answers.

“Is this almost over?” Sylvie whines, poking her sharp nail into my side. I hiss in pain

and turn to glare at her.

“Show some respect,” I demand with a growl.

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She raises an eyebrow at me and then scoffs, rolling her eyes.

“I’m bored,” she whispers, pulling her phone out of her bag. Several of the pack members around us gasp in surprise.

Sylvie’s behavior is abysmal, and I grit my teeth. The way she’s acting not only reflects poorly on our pack, but as my intended mate, it reflects poorly on me.

“Put that away, or I’ll smash it on the ground,” I tell her harshly.

She just curls her lip and takes a step back, just out of reach.

“No,” she says, with a cruel smile. I clench my fists in anger.

My mother gives me a concerned look, and I turn my attention back to the rite. Yelena is brushing tears from her eyes, and it makes my heart hurt.

Her pain is my pain, and I wish there were something I could do to fix it. If I could, I would hold her and lend her my strength while she grieves. But I can’t. Not anymore.

Finally, the rites are concluded, and we all bow our heads as the Moon Goddess blessing is read out. Then the first torch is lit and reverently placed under the pyre. The rites of our ancestors require the burning of our earthly forms. It is said that, through the ash, we are able to free our spirits and return them to the Moon Goddess. I exhale a sigh of relief.

It’s done. We got through it. Callie has been laid to rest, and I have survived the

Farewell Rite without losing my mind and confronting Yelena.

Sylvie leaves as soon as the fire starts to burn, mumbling something about how she hates the old-fashioned traditions of our pack. I let her go and instead stay in my place, watching over Callie and the remaining members of our pack who have stayed to pay their respects.

The crowd dwindles over time, but as long as Yelena is there, I'm not moving. She has remained in the same spot, sitting on the ground with her arms around her knees. Every so often, she'll throw a flower or bundle of herbs into the fire, making a little popping sound.

"I got the information you requested," Vincent says, sliding in next to me. He's holding a manila envelope, and I take it, ripping it open to scan the contents inside.

"You're sure?" I ask, looking over at him with wide eyes.

"I verified it myself, sir," he says, solemnly.

I look down at the paper again and read the name.

"Cleo," I say, letting it roll off my tongue. "Age five."

Yelena's daughter. The next Seer.

I don't have proof, but I know it in my heart. Cleo is mine as much as she is Yelena's. I look over at Yelena. Even though I have every right to be angry, I realize I'm not mad at her for hiding Cleo from me.

When Yelena left, we weren't in a good place. I wouldn't have known how to handle that news then. While I'm sad that I have missed out on part of my child's early

childhood, I'm grateful that her mother was protective of her and still is.

Protective like a Luna should be. Like my Fated Mate.

My wolf growls, and I clench my fist, trying to keep control over myself.

I still have to figure out how to deal with the fact that Cleo is a Seer. It will need to be handled delicately and quickly. The consequences of word getting out about her, before she's under the protection of the pack, are too dire to consider.

But now that I know, I'll be able to protect her too. There's no way Yelena won't choose the obvious choice for her daughter's safety. Our daughter.

She'll come home. It's the only reasonable choice.

My mate and my daughter. Living here where they belong.

My wolf wants to howl with joy.

"Set up a cottage ready near mine," I tell Vincent quietly. "Both of them are moving back home."

Chapter Seventeen

Yelena

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:05 am

“Honey, how was your day? Did you do anything fun?” I ask, holding the phone tightly to my ear. The bathroom stall is cramped, but it’s the only truly private place I’ve found all day. My anxiety about Cleo has been at an all-time high. Maybe it’s just being here and away from her that has my instincts on high alert, but my body is telling me that something is wrong.

Cleo chatters into the phone, telling me all about the butterflies she saw on her walk and the apples she had with lunch. She sounds fine, and I try to relax.

“That’s great, sweetheart,” I whisper, forcing myself to breathe normally.

“But, after lunch, I started not feeling well,” Cleo continues, “My head started to hurt really bad, and then my heart got really fast. Like thump-thump-thumpity-thump. Sometimes when I close my eyes, I’m scared the bad things are going to come in my dreams.”

I swallow back a curse.

According to everything I’ve read, and the knowledge Callie had passed on to me, the physical manifestations of the Seer gift start shortly after the last Seer has passed.

Is it starting? Are her powers manifesting? My poor, sweet baby.

“Maybe you need to take a rest? Lie down on the couch and watch a movie,” I suggest, trying to keep my tone light. The last thing I want to do is alarm her and make her anxious about anything.

“Are you coming home soon, mama?” she asks, her small voice breaking my heart.

I wipe a tear from my eye. “Of course, sweetheart. I’ll be home very soon. I’m almost done.”

“I miss you.”

I grip the phone tighter. “I miss you too, honey bun.”

There’s a rattle of the doorknob, and I hear someone enter the bathroom.

“I’ll call you back later,” I whisper to Cleo before hanging up.

I flush the toilet for good measure before opening the small stall door and stepping out into the main bathroom.

Sylvie is standing in front of the sole mirror, reapplying her lipstick. We make eye contact, and she sneers, looking me up and down with obvious disgust.

“Excuse me,” I say, moving toward the sink.

She plants her feet and glares at me, refusing to move. “You can wait for the future Luna of this pack to be done,” she snaps, “Or go wash your hands outside in the creek like the trash you are.”

My mouth drops open at her audacity. Good luck, Austin.

“I beg your pardon?” I ask, drawing myself up to my full height. I’m not very tall, but even without heels, I’m still taller than her.

She turns back to the mirror, slowly drawing the red onto her lips. The color is much

too bright for her, making her appear like a painted doll.

“Why are you even here?” she asks, snapping the lid closed and whirling around to face me. “You can’t be so desperate as to think that Austin would have any interest in you again?”

I move to the tap and turn on the water, washing my hands as I think about her words.

She doesn’t know that Austin kissed me in the woods. Does she know that we were Fated?

“I’m here because this is my pack and a beloved member of my community died,” I say firmly. “I returned so I could pay my respects. That’s all.”

“When I’m Luna, you won’t get within ten feet of our gates. I’ll make sure of that,” she sneers. “We don’t need your trashy kind here. You ran away once. Why don’t you just keep on running? I heard you on the phone. Do you have some sort of sick human that you’ve taken as a mate? Disgusting.”

I scoff and grab a paper towel. The flicker of anger that is rising in me is making it hard to remain calm.

How dare she talk to me like this!

“Do you think your duties as Luna extend so far?” I ask, pasting a smile on my face. “That may be how your previous pack worked, but it’s not how the Nightwing Pack does things. The Luna role here is to serve your Alpha and your pack. As the future Alpha, Austin has repeatedly told me I’m welcome here, as has the current Alpha Malakai and Luna Elizabeth. I think I’m fine to come and go as I please. If that changes, it won’t come from you. But please, keep working on your lipstick. You’re supposed to smile and look pretty, aren’t you?”

Her cheeks flush at my words, and she opens her mouth to reply but seems at a loss for words.

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I can't help but feel a little smug. Clearly, she didn't expect me to stand up for myself.

With a huff, she turns back toward the mirror, trying to regain her lost composure. But the power dynamic has already shifted.

Taking advantage of her temporary speechlessness, I step past her and make my way toward the door.

"Just because you've got Austin wrapped around your little finger doesn't mean it'll stay that way," she retorts as I rest my hand on the door. "I mean, what is it about you? You're washed up, ugly, and you can't even dress yourself."

I shrug, refusing to let her see the hurt that her comments have caused.

"Perhaps," I call out over my shoulder, "You should worry less about who's allowed in Nightwing Pack and more about being appropriate Luna material. After all, you aren't mated yet. Things can change."

Her eyes meet mine again in the mirror. This time, they are wide with shock rather than narrowed with disdain. I shoot her a final hard look before exiting the bathroom and rejoin the throng outside.

My heart is still beating wildly from our confrontation. I don't know what possessed me to talk to her like that. It's so unlike me. Fighting with the future Luna is dangerous, especially when I'm contemplating coming back here with Cleo.

But I don't regret it. She's been nothing but vile to me since she saw me. Putting her

in her place, however ill-advised, feels good.

I just hope I don't live to regret it.

I look around the crowd of people, automatically looking for Austin. I don't see him, but that's not a surprise.

A part of me wants to go find him and warn him that I pissed off his intended mate, but ever since our moment in the woods, I've been avoiding him.

He has to know what she's like. Maybe he's used to it.

"Just get through tonight and tomorrow," I whisper to myself, looking around at the crowds. A bonfire is burning in the clearing, and music is playing.

Callie's life has been well and fully celebrated tonight.

"You have every right to be here," I remind myself, walking over to the table and grabbing a drink. "No matter whatshesays."

Still, I can feel her hateful eyes on me as I move around the crowd. Her whispered comments filter back to me as she does her best to spread rumors about me among the pack.

Hideous bitch.

Delusional.

Left us for humans. Traitor.

Talking to herself in the bathroom. Probably crazy.

I force a smile and move to talk to the small knot of healers gathered in the corner. They greet me with enthusiasm, and I quickly fall into conversation, comparing the different treatments I have learned with the apothecary treatments they are more familiar with. Our conversation continues, and I find myself relaxing. No matter what, this is my pack. My people. I've grown up around them, and they are like family. Sylvie can gossip all she wants or try to spread rumors. It doesn't matter. I'm proud of the life I've built and the choices I've made. If she wants to be petty and rude, that's on her. The people who matter will see right through her.

Tomorrow is the Alpha Ascension ceremony, and after that, I can go home and figure out what on Earth I'm going to do about Cleo...and what I'm going to tell Austin when I have to come back.

One day at a time. I can do this.

Chapter Eighteen

Austin

"The day is here, son. How do you feel?"

I glance up as my father approaches, his heavy hand clapping me on the shoulder. I adjust the collar of my shirt. My face is stoic as I gaze at my reflection in the mirror.

"I'm ready to do my duty to our pack, sir," I answer automatically.

"You and Sylvie will represent the new way, the way of peace among our packs. I'm proud of you," he continues.

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I busy myself with a button so he can't see my face. Becoming Alpha of the Nightwing Pack has been my destiny since birth. I've trained for it, accepted it, and grown to love the responsibility that I will soon carry.

For years, I fought the lack of choices, but I understand now what being Alpha means. My role demands that I take care of and lead every member of my pack, but choosing my role means that I want to do that. And I do.

In the years since Yelena left, I threw myself into learning everything I could about how our pack functions. I sat in on events with my mother, the Luna, to better understand the needs of our female pack members. I even spent some time in the nursery, caring for our pups.

I feel ready to lead. Just not with Sylvie. The thought of her bound to me as my mate, serving my pack as their Luna, makes me recoil. She's the opposite of what a good Luna should be, and I feel nothing but apathy and distaste when I try to look at her as a mate.

We're not a match.

I know my father has worked hard to negotiate the Peace Accord. He's proud of the fact that he's turning the pack over to me during a time of hard-won peace. To turn my back on these agreements could not only risk going to war again with the Highland Pack, it could tarnish my father's legacy.

Lives could be lost. It could be years before we get another opportunity like this to find peace.

And yet...

The Moon Goddess gifted me a Fated Mate for a reason. I have to believe She has a plan for me, for my mate, and for my pack. It is my greatest regret that I questioned Her plan all those years ago. Because of my actions, Yelena left, and I had to watch her disappear from my life. Now that she's back, I'll do whatever it takes to keep her here. Whatever it takes.

It will work out the way it should. I know it.

Once I end things with Sylvie and get Yelena back, I'll be back on the right path. I will be able to stand proudly in front of my family and my pack with the right Luna by my side, and if my suspicions are correct, be able to present my daughter as well.

It's the future I was supposed to have in the first place.

"Time to go, my love," my mother says, joining my father. She steps forward, straightening my collar for me. "We're so very proud of you, Austin. You will lead this pack well."

I smile at her and then nod to my father. It's time to do this.

We step out of the Alpha's cottage, now my cottage, and into the crowd of our pack. The excitement for the day is palpable, and I can't help but smile.

They follow us to the sacred clearing and form a circle around us. The Elder Council motions for my father and I to stand before them.

"An auspicious day," Elder Peter says, greeting me with a smile.

Our ceremony is short—a formality of sorts—but the tradition is much beloved by

our pack. Father and I stand, side by side, as the Elders circle around us in their shifted form. Only Elder Peter remains in his human form.

He sprinkles moon water on us, chanting the words from the Old Days. I feel the shiver of power hovering over my skin and then settling in.

Alpha.

The pack is getting rowdy, and my wolf itches to run and celebrate our new role.

“Patience,” my father whispers with a smile. “It’s almost complete.”

I smile back and close my eyes, letting the power wash over me. It’s almost euphoric.

“And so, by the power vested in us by the Moon Goddess and in accordance with the traditions of the Ancients, we pass on the power of Alpha from old to new. Alpha Malakai, your time as leader of the Nightwing Pack has been one of abundance. We thank you for your service and honor you.”

The pack howls in agreement and I watch as my father waves to them. I scan the crowd, noting that Yelena is in the very back. I, too, wave, looking at her first before smiling to the rest of the pack.

“Alpha Austin, your era has begun. Please, take your spot as our leader.”

The shift comes over me almost instantly. I spring forward, my black wolf leaping into the clearing. I howl, calling my pack to me.

Everyone around me shifts, and the bays, howls, and yips of wolves fill the clearing. Tradition states one of two things can happen: either I claim my Luna immediately, or I take the pack on a hunt.

I look over at Sylvie and her tawny brown wolf. She's pushing past my packmates in her eagerness to get to me.

I won't be claiming her today, or maybe ever. I don't want my pack to see her with me anymore. And, if I'm being truthful, I don't want Yelena to see her with me.

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Instead, I dash into the woods, howling for my pack to follow me.

It's time for a hunt.

“Do you have any idea how humiliating it was for you to just abandon me like that, Austin? What were you thinking?” Sylvie says shrilly.

The high pitch of her voice makes me cringe, and I notice several people looking over at us.

Great. The hunt had been epic. We all bonded as a pack, and the smell of roast venison fills the air. Even Yelena was into it. I saw her catch a rabbit, carrying it proudly as we made our way back into the yard.

We're going to eat well tonight and I'm hungry.

But...I still have one more task to do before I can celebrate.

I look at her with a sigh. I need to tell her. For her sake, I had planned to do this privately, but...it needs to be done.

I pull my shorts on and slide my arms into my button-down shirt, leaving it open.

“Come with me,” I tell her, holding out my hand.

She gives me a narrow look, but grabs my hand, digging her long nails into my palm. Her fake smile is on full display as I walk through the crowd. My father catches my eye, raising his glass in a toast when he sees Sylvie and I.

I shake my head slightly and he frowns.

“Let’s go into the Alpha’s cottage,” I tell her, leading her toward the white house.

She sniffs but allows me to pull her along.

“Ugh, I’m going to have to spend weeks redecorating here. It’s not to my taste at all,” she complains once we step inside.

I try to harness the spark of anger that I feel rising as she continues to disparage my mother’s taste.

“I thought we’d have some privacy here. Why don’t you go take a seat in the living room? I’ll grab us a drink,” I invite her, motioning toward the couch.

She gives me a sultry look that makes me want to gag. “Oh, you want privacy? I get it. Those Alpha urges are riding you hard, aren’t they? Come to me, baby. I’ll help you take care of them.”

The way she looks at me makes me feel slightly nauseated, all but confirming that my decision is the correct one.

I try to give her a little wave, but I turn around and walk quickly to the kitchen. I’ve been agonizing over how to tell her this for a while now.

There’s no good way to break an engagement, but the consequences of doing so now are dire.

The backdoor to the kitchen opens, and I look up, meeting my father's stern gaze.

"What are you doing, Austin?" he asks quietly.

I shake my head. "I can't mate her," I whisper. "She's not my match."

He sighs and rests his hands on the counter. "We made a promise as a pack. If you go back on that, you'll bring us to the brink of war."

I run my hands through my hair and nod. "Do you think I don't know that? I can't stand her. She's repulsive. My wolf hates her."

My father stares at me for a long time.

"You'll need a Luna," he says, finally.

I nod in agreement. "I will. And I have one in mind."

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He rolls his eyes and sighs. “Yelena? Is that who you think your match is? Son, you lost your chance with her. She left. Sylvie is your best choice now.”

“We are destined to be together, and she’s back now. She’s the one I want,” I protest.

My father sighs.

“Austin, man-to-man, you should reconsider this. Love matches are rare, but Sylvie has the skills to help you. She may need a little more training on the protocols of our pack versus the one she grew up in, but she’s a solid choice. And with her, comes peace.”

I shake my head.

“I’ve made my choice, father. As a man and as Alpha.”

I can tell the words rankle my father. I haven’t even been Alpha for an hour, and I’m using it against him. He wants to argue, but—he stops himself, gritting his teeth instead.

“You’ll bring destruction upon us,” he growls before storming out of the kitchen.

“Baby, where did you go?” Sylvie calls out. Even the sound of her voice makes me want to rip my ears out.

I stalk back into the living room, determined.

“We need to talk,” I say bluntly.

Sylvie is stretched out on the couch, her shirt unbuttoned to reveal a glimpse of her cleavage. Her skirt is pulled up, exposing the smooth length of her leg. I avert my gaze toward the wall and signal for her to make herself decent again.

“What the fuck is your problem?” she bites out, covering her legs with the blanket and buttoning up her shirt.

“You,” I answer sharply. “But thankfully, that will be resolved very soon.”

Her gaze sharpens, and she folds her arms across her chest.

“The contracts have already been finalized. Breaking them will mean war,” she warns through gritted teeth.

“We deserve a better fate than to be paired together like this,” I tell her. My tone is firm, but not unkind. “You dislike me, I dislike you. Can’t we just agree on that?”

“You dislike me?” she scoffs. “That’s rich, coming from you.”

I shrug and cross my arms.

“I’ve been nothing but pleasant since the moment I got dropped in this god-forsaken trash heap that you call a pack. I’ve done my duty because I deserve to be Luna. You don’t get to take that away from me now,” she hisses.

“That right there is part of the problem,” I counter. “That superficial facade you put on doesn’t hide the ugliness beneath it. Not anymore. We are fundamentally incompatible, and I don’t choose you as Luna for my pack.”

She gasps. For a moment, she looks taken aback—even vulnerable. But then her expression hardens.

“Do you care so little for your pack?” she spits. “If you think my father will take kindly to this, think again.”

“I’m aware of the risks. They are more acceptable to me than a future with you. You only think of yourself. You are petty and selfish. You are not the Luna our pack needs,” I reply.

Her face contorts in anger.

“You’ll regret this,” she growls. “I’ll make sure you do.”

I open my mouth to say something else, but I hear a soft knock on the door. Someone pushes it open.

“Austin?” a soft voice calls out.

My entire body snaps to attention. Yelena.

Sylvie’s eyes narrow to tiny, beady little slits. “Is this your whore?” she asks, snidely. “You’re throwing me over for what? A human-loving little freak who already ran away from you?”

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Yelena walks in and freezes when she sees Sylvie and I.

“I’m so sorry,” she stammers. “I was just going to say goodbye to Alpha Malakai and Luna Elizabeth. I’m on my way back to the city. Just...”

Her voice trails off, and she looks between Sylvie and I, slowly backing up.

“You bitch,” Sylvie snarls, advancing on her. “Do you think you can make a move on my mate in front of me?”

Yelena holds her hands out, looking at me with alarm. “I didn’t make a move on anyone,” she protests.

“Sylvie, enough!” I growl, standing to my full height. “Get out. You’re no longer welcome on my pack lands. Our engagement is broken. Take your things and go.”

Sylvie shrieks, her claws shifting as she runs toward Yelena. I move swiftly, blocking her access. She shifts, snapping her jaws at me and at Yelena as she runs from the room.

The backdoor slams shut, and I can hear the snarls as Sylvie runs through the pack toward Highland lands.

That’s going to be a problem. But not for tonight.

“Wow,” Yelena says, looking at me. “Are you okay?”

I want to hug her. Only Yelena would be verbally and physically threatened by an unhinged she-wolf, and her first question would be if I am okay.

One of the many reasons why I love her, and I need her as my Luna.

“I never should have been engaged to her in the first place,” I confess, walking over to the bar cart and pouring myself a drink. “She’s not my true mate.”

Yelena doesn’t say anything, but I can feel the tension rising between us.

“What are you saying, Austin?” she asks, finally.

I turn to her and smile.

“What I should have said five years ago.”

She pales and staggers over to the couch, sinking on the cushions. Her wide eyes are locked on mine.

I move to sit in the chair across from her and reach for her hand.

It’s ice cold, and I rub it between my hands to warm her. My wolf is thrilled with the contact.

“I made a mistake, Yelena. One that I hope I can correct,” I begin, looking at her. “I fought our mate bond for the entirety of our engagement.”

She stiffens and drops her gaze.

“I fought it because I thought I knew better than Fate. I thought what I wanted was choices. When you left, it was the most profoundly desperate feeling of loss that I’ve

ever felt.”

Her breath hitches, and her shoulders slump. I rub her hands more and continue.

“What the last five years without you have taught me is that Fate knew best. I put myself and you through immense heartache by pushing you away and burying the feelings I had for you. It was cowardly, and I am so, so sorry.”

“Austin...” she says, her voice shaky, “it’s been five years. Everything has changed. You don’t know what you’re saying.”

“I’m saying I love you, Yelena,” I answer, confidently. “You are my True Mate. We are paired by the Moon Goddess herself. You are the only one I want as my Luna.”

She pulls her hand from my grasp and stands, her eyes frantic.

“No, no, Austin,” she pleads, “You don’t understand. I’m...”

“A mother?” I say, quietly, standing and reaching for her again. “I know.”

She freezes and stares at me.

“What?” she whispers, hoarsely.

“Cleo, right? Your daughter? The next future Seer?”

Her eyes widen even further as realization dawns on her face. "No..." she whispers, taking a step back. "But how? How did you find out?" the words tumble out of her mouth in a rush.

“I have my ways,” I reply evenly, my gaze steady and unflinching.

Yelena blinks rapidly, trying to hold back the tears pooling at the corners of her eyes.

I reach for her, but she shies away from my touch.

“Yelena, please,” I ask. “Just tell me. Is she mine?”

My own heart is threatening to pound out of my chest as I wait for her answer. I think I know the answer, but I need to hear her say it. To confirm it.

Cleo is mine.

“No,” she chokes out, tears glistening in her eyes. “No.”

She stumbles backward, crashing into the end table and knocking a vase to the ground in her haste to get away from me.

“I’m leaving,” she whispers, before shifting and bounding through the door. “Don’t follow me, Austin. Just...let me go.”

I watch, frozen in place, as she leaves me once again. My heart is pounding, and my wolf is keening in my chest.

I lost her once. I will not lose her again. I can’t.

With shaking hands, I grab my phone and shoot off a text to Vincent. Preparations will need to be made because I’m going to the city and I’m not coming back without her. Not this time.

Chapter Nineteen

Yelena

I lock my car with a click of my keys and hurry toward the building. For the first time since I started at Ruby Clinic, I’m late.

Cleo had another vivid dream last night and neither one of us got much sleep. At least it wasn’t a nightmare this time. The worry I have that she will have an episode or a vision during the day or when I’m not with her remains ever present.

She told me she dreamed of an old woman who smelled like lavender and who lived in a little cottage in the woods. Unlike the other dreams, this one felt strange but comforting. She said the old woman smiled at her and told her to be brave and that she would see her at home. There was a big black wolf that looked at her, and then they played together. He showed her the woods, and they ran in a large meadow with wildflowers. When she was tired, she laid down and the big black wolf laid down next to her, keeping her safe. When she woke up, she was in her bed.

I reassured her the best I knew how, but, as I held her close, I knew the truth.

She dreamed of Callie and the Pack...and Austin. There was no one else she could have been describing. The big black wolf who protects her. My heart feels like it's being squeezed into pieces.

If Callie is appearing in her dreams, that means her prophecy must be correct. Cleo is the new Seer, and my heart simply aches at that fact.

How will I tell her? She doesn't even know about her wolf yet. Or the pack. It's too much!

And then there's Austin...

My mind is muddled as I hurry across the parking lot. It's been seven days since I left pack lands and came home to the city.

Seven days since we completed Callie's Farewell Rites, Austin ascended to Alpha, broke off his engagement, and declared his love for me. And admitted he knew about Cleo.

I shiver. It all seems so surreal. The last week has been full of planning, research, and worry. I've spent every free hour pouring through Callie's old letters for clues about what I should do next. When I'm not thinking about Callie or Cleo, I'm thinking about Austin.

Seeing him again....it was a lot. I knew it would be difficult, but I never could have expected the way things went down. Or the way he kissed me.

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I touch my lips in memory and close my eyes, reliving that moment for just a second. Surreal.

With a deep breath, I reach out and push open the glass doors of the clinic, the cold metal handle biting against my palm. The fluorescent lights of the reception area flicker and hum, casting an eerie glow over everything. The smell of antiseptic fills my nose as I make my way into the treatment rooms.

"Ms. Croft!" a sharp voice calls out from behind me. I turn to see Dr. Taylor, his thick glasses perched precariously on his hooked nose, his arms crossed sternly across his chest. "You're late. That's unlike you."

"I know, I'm sorry," I apologize quickly, pushing a loose strand of hair behind my ear. His eyes scrutinize me for a moment longer before he gives a curt nod.

I try to put on a brave face, but everything feels different.

"Room four," he instructs crisply, handing me a patient chart. As I hurry down the hallway to meet my first patient of the day, my mind can't help but drift back to Austin.

How many years did I dream of hearing him say that? How many times did I beg the Moon Goddess to give me a sign, any sign, that he even cared? Why is this happening now and all at once?

I shake off the memory and force myself to concentrate as I push through the doors, greeting a young boy and his mother.

At least my work will give be a worthy distraction.I hope.

My smile is automatic as I ease into the routine, taking vitals and asking questions. The boy, only a few years older than Cleo, watches me with wide, curious eyes. His leg is bleeding with an ugly scrape, and he's holding an ice pack to his knee.

"Cold," he declares as I press the stethoscope to his bare chest.

I chuckle softly, "Yes, sorry about that."

His mother smiles at our exchange, her eyes tired but grateful for my gentle care. I know firsthand how worrying it can be when your child is injured.

"He's going to be okay, mom. You did the right thing bringing him in," I tell her quietly.

She gives me a relieved smile.

As I kneel on the white tile floor, placing bandages on the boy's scraped knee, my heart aches. I'm not sure if it's for this young one who's bravely trying not to cry, or for myself, or even Cleo. I think of the pain that she will one day experience when she has her first shift.

Will she be brave, like this little boy, or will she be scared? My eyes well with tears and I have to duck my head to hide them. She doesn't even know about her shift yet.

"Can I have a blue sticker when you're done?" the little boy asks, bringing me back into the moment.

My fear for Cleo and the unknown is still weighing heavy in my heart but I realize there's nothing I can do about it right now. I need to focus.

“Great job, champ!” I exclaim as I finish wrapping his knee. “You can definitely have a blue sticker!”

His toothy grin is contagious, and it lights up the room.

Maybe distractions are exactly what I need.

After treating the boy, I lose myself in my work, making my way through routine check-ups, minor injuries, and unfortunately, a severe case of pneumonia.

My patients tell me their stories, and I nod in all the right places, even managing to throw in an encouraging word or two, but my mind wanders to Austin over and over.

It’s like he’s infected me, making it impossible for me to forget him or concentrate on anything. When I’m not thinking of him, I’m thinking of the pack.

It’s my fault they don’t have a Luna right now. I know why Austin did what he did with Sylvie. Their match was terrible. Neither one of them would ever have found happiness there. But then he said the things he said to me.

He wanted to choose me for Luna.

And I said no.

I refused him. I wonder what my pack would say if they knew the truth? Would they resent me? Would they understand? I wish I could tell them how long it took for me to realize that, as much as I love my pack and was honored to be the future Luna, putting my happiness on the back burner almost destroyed me. My daughter, my job, and my own wellness are my priorities now. I can’t give them all up so easily. Not when I know firsthand what it could do to me.

He says he's changed. Maybe it would be different this time.

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Before I can think about that further, I hear footsteps.

“Ms. Croft, we need you to run to the lab, please.” I look up and nod as Dr. Taylor hands me a small specimen bag.

“Yes, sir,” I answer automatically.

I take the specimen bag and hurry down the hallway toward the lab. My mind drifts as I walk, thoughts of Austin and the pack swirling through my head.

What if I had said yes? Would we be mated already, planning a bonding ceremony? Would the pack have accepted me after I left them all those years ago? A nervous knot forms in my stomach at the thought. Could Austin really make me happy after all these years? We are Fated, but is he really a changed man? Would this time really be different?

I don't have the answers to the questions that burn my soul.

I reach the lab and hand the sample to the technician. As I turn to leave, my gaze falls on a flyer tacked to the bulletin board. “Full Moon Hike” it reads in bold letters, advertising a group hike during the next full moon.

My wolf stirs in my chest. Since our visit to our packlands, she's been more active. We both ache for the freedom of running under the moonlight and feeling the earth under our feet. Like we could at home.

I'm so distracted by my thoughts that I'm not paying attention to where I'm going. I

bump into another person on my way to the elevator and stumble forward. Strong arms grab me, saving me from falling on the floor.

I feel a familiar zing of awareness flow through me, and I breathe in deep. I'd know that scent anywhere but here? It's unexpected...and unwelcome.

"Yelena?" Austin asks, looking down at me with worry in his silvery eyes.

I shrug off his hands and straighten my scrubs before I take a wide step away from him.

"What are you doing here, Austin?" I hiss, my eyes darting around to see if anyone has noticed us. Austin is not the kind of man that goes unnoticed for very long. He draws attention, especially among humans. Everything about him, from his muscular frame, silvery eyes, and thick, dark hair seems specifically designed by the Moon Goddess to draw in the female gaze.

And I am not immune. Austin takes my breath away every time I see him. He's the only man who makes my body instantly respond just by being close to me.

"Your father gave me the address of the clinic. So this is where you've been working?" he says, moving aside for another nurse who gives us a curious look.

My father gave him the address of the clinic? I'm shocked.

"Yes, I'm at work, and you aren't a patient here. You need to go," I tell him sternly.

His face falls, and for a second, I want to reconsider and tell him to stay. My wolf longs for me to tell him to stay.

But I can't risk this job. It's how I support Cleo. I've worked hard for this.

“Yelena, can’t we talk? Please? There’s so much more that we need to say. That I need to say,” he says, pleadingly.

I shake my head, even though my heart screams at me to hear him out.

“I’m at work, Austin. Please respect that,” I tell him quietly.

He holds up his hands in a placating gesture and then nods. “After work, then? Can I meet you somewhere? I just want to talk. Please, Yelena. Talk to me?”

I sigh and look down at the floor.

“There’s nothing left to talk about, Austin. I’m sure you have a million things to do back home. Maybe you should go there and do them.”

I don’t give him another chance to speak, instead I hurry over to the elevator and jam the button.

“You had faith in me when I didn’t deserve it,” he calls out after me. “You believed in us then. I believe in us now. I’ll show you, Yelena. I’m a better man.”

The elevator doors close, leaving me in blissful silence and solitude for a moment.

I push the stop button, halting the elevator’s progress, and sink to the floor, resting my head in my hands.

He came to find me.

He wants to talk.

He says he believes in us now.

I let myself savor that knowledge for a fleeting moment.

My pulse is pounding, and I feel like I'm being pulled in too many different directions at once. If Cleo is manifesting her Seer abilities, going home to the pack is really the only safe option.

But living there, with Austin as the Alpha? Having to see him every day? To watch him with Cleo? Knowing that I've rejected him? Will I be able to resist the call of my mate bond, or am I destined to fall for him again?

I can't stand the idea of being hurt again but, at the same time, I don't know if I can escape it.

I don't know whether I want to scream or cry.

Moon Goddess, show me the answers. Show me the path I'm supposed to take. Please. I pray, holding onto the moonstone ring I've worn since childhood.

I take another deep breath and then I press the button on the elevator again.

I finish my shift in a daze, barely registering the faces and voices of my patients and coworkers. All I can think about is Austin, here, wanting to talk. The encounter plays over and over again in my head.

His pleading eyes, his determined stance, telling me he's not giving up. A small part of me thrills at his persistence even though my practical side remains wary.

We have too much history to simply pick up where we left off all those years ago.

Chapter Twenty

Yelena

“Mama, is dinner almost done? I’m so hungry!” Cleo yells, bouncing up and down on the couch cushions.

I smile at her fondly and stir the chicken soup I’ve made.

“Almost done, sweetie. Be careful on that couch, you don’t want to fall.”

She grins at me and jumps more. There’s a wildness about her that I recognize. Even though she doesn’t have her wolf yet, she’s still the daughter of two shifters. What would be dangerous for a human child is simply a fun activity for her.

The doorbell rings and I look up in surprise.

“Oh! I’ll get it!” Cleo yells, bounding toward the door.

I move the soup to another burner and hurry after her. “Cleo, wait. You don’t answer the door, that’s for grown-ups only,” I call.

But it’s too late.

She’s already climbed onto the sofa table and unlocked the deadbolt, swinging the door open just as I arrive.

"Hi!" she says brightly.

"Hello," a familiar voice greets her back.

A mixture of anger and surprise roils in my stomach.

"Cleo, go play. Mama's got the door," I tell her, stepping around my curious daughter.

Austin stands on my porch. He's holding a bakery box.

"Do you have cake?" Cleo asks, her sharp little eyes glued to the box. Austin looks at me and then down at my daughter.

"They're cookies, half pint. But maybe next time I'll bring cake."

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Cleo claps for joy and then turns to me. “Is the nice man with the cookies staying for dinner?” she asks, hopefully.

I glare at Austin over her head. “No,” I mouth.

But he ignores me.

“I’m a friend of your mama’s from when she was your age,” he says, smoothly. “We grew up right next to each other. And wouldn’t you know it? I just bought a condo right next to this one, so we get to be neighbors again!”

Cleo beams at him. “Really? Well, you should have dinner with us. And bring the cookies.”

She turns to me, her eyes big and pleading. “Mama, can your nice friend have dinner with us and share his cookies? Please? Pretty please?”

I melt at her expression and sigh, giving in.

“Fine. Austin, you can come in,” I grumble, holding the door open enough for him to slip inside.

“Thank you,” he whispers, taking off his jacket and placing it neatly on the table.

“Your name is Austin?” Cleo asks, curiously. “That’s a funny name. My name is Cleo.”

I look between the two of them and feel the smallest twinge of guilt start in my gut. This is not how I would have thought Austin would meet our daughter. To her, he's a stranger who has come for dinner. She doesn't know the importance of this moment. And Austin looks like he's trying his damndest to act casual, but I know him well enough to read his tells. He's nervous.

She holds out her little hand and I watch in horror as Austin takes it and gives it a little shake. Oh no, what if her abilities have manifested? What happens if she reads him?

But she just smiles. "It's nice to meet you," she says, properly. "Do you want to help me build a fort with the sofa cushions?"

She doesn't wait for him to answer, she just runs off into the living room and starts taking the cushions off the couch.

"You don't say a word about the pack, Callie—any of it," I warn Austin. "I haven't told her, and I don't plan on it tonight."

"You have my word, Yelena," he says, solemnly. His hand rests on the small of my back and a small shiver travels up my spine. "She's beautiful. She looks just like you."

I spin away from him and storm back to the kitchen to cook more food for our meal.

As I'm preparing the salad, I look out into the living room and a wistfulness overtakes me.

Austin is on his knees, carefully balancing cushions to help build Cleo's fort while she runs in circles, bringing him pillows and blankets to improve it.

He'd be a natural father. She would love having him around. He looks so at ease with her. Like he belongs there.

The thought scares me and I quickly finish chopping the tomatoes and add them to my salad.

"Dinner's ready," I call out, setting the final dishes on the table.

Austin and Cleo come in and Cleo giggles when Austin holds her chair for her.

"For the princess," he jokes, before moving over to my chair, "And the queen."

"Who's going to hold your chair? Are you a prince or the king?" she demands as she stuffs a roll in her mouth.

"I can hold my own chair," he assures her, meeting my eyes with a smile. The exchange is so sweet, it forces me to relax and smile myself.

Just as I'm serving Cleo her bowl of soup, I notice that she's dropped her bread, and she's staring blankly at the wall.

"Cleo?" I ask, worriedly. "Cleo, are you okay?"

She doesn't answer, and I quickly put the bowl down and move to her side.

She's still breathing, but it's coming in quick pants. Her eyes are unfocused and she's sweating.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:06 am

“Oh my God,” I whisper, taking her pulse. “Oh my God, Cleo!”

Austin hurries to my side. “What’s happening? Is she okay?”

I shake my head and try to think. Do I call the doctor? Is she having a seizure of some kind? Is she having a vision? I tried to remember what happened when Callie had a vision. I don’t remember her looking quite so pale, but I have a vague recollection of her just drifting off into her prophecies sometimes. Could this be the same? Is this Cleo’s first vision?

As quickly as she went into her trance, she pops out. Her eyes slowly become more focused, and she looks at me. Her face looks stricken.

“May I be excused, mama?” she asks, quietly.

“Are you okay, sweetie?” I ask, running my hand over her hair.

She just nods. “Please? I just want to lay down.”

I bite my lip and then nod. “Okay. But I am going to come check on you in a few minutes.”

Cleo just nods and slips from her chair. Austin and I both watch as she makes her way down the hall. I exhale when I hear the door to her room click shut.

“That was a vision, wasn’t it?” Austin asks, helping me stand.

“I don’t know,” I answer, truthfully.

I’m suddenly not very hungry.

“You need to come home, Yelena. If she’s the next Seer, you know how much danger she’s in. Let me protect her, and you. Even if you never want to be with me again, let me protect her,” he says, passionately.

“I’ve protected her for the last five years just fine without you,” I tell him, gathering up my plates. “Don’t you think I know what’s best for her? I’m the one who has raised her all these years. If we move back to the pack, it will be my decision, not yours,” I snap.

He looks at me for a long time, his expression hard to decipher. If I didn’t know better, I’d say he looks both heartbroken and intensely frustrated. I’ve never seen him look like this until recently.

“Is this because of me?” he asks, finally. “Are you staying away because of me?”

I don’t give him an answer, I just dig in the cupboard for a plastic container and start ladling soup into it.

“Yelena, please, just, think about it. Please don’t stay in danger just because you think it would be too awkward to share a pack with me. I wouldn’t do that to you. You’re in charge of our boundaries. If you say you don’t want me, I’ll respect that,” he adds, heavily.

I finish ladling the soup, and then put the lid on. I carefully wrap a roll in tin foil. I gather it up and hand it to him.

“Here’s dinner,” I say softly. “I think you should go.”

His face falls, but he nods and stands. “The cookies are for her. If she wants them,” he says, taking the food I offered.

“And Yelena?” he calls out as he puts on his jacket. “I really did buy the condo across from yours. Number fifty-seven. You can come visit me anytime. My card is here, in case you need to get a hold of me.” He places the card on the table, and I grit my teeth and nod, walking him to the door.

“Good night, Austin,” I whisper, shutting and locking the door behind him. I exhale and lean against the door, trying to get my thoughts in order.

Austin coming here was a shock. Seeing him at my doorway, watching him play with Cleo—it was a lot. I don’t have the mental energy to analyze it right now. I’m too worried about Cleo.

Please, Moon Goddess, watch over her. I pray as I pick up the sofa cushions from Cleo’s pillow fort and place them back on the sofa. That girl is the most important person in the world to me. I would do anything for her. The knowledge that she has this gift that could harm her, or others, makes me sick with worry.

Once the living room is put back together, I make my way to Cleo’s bedroom and peek in on her. She’s sleeping peacefully, curled up in a ball next to all her stuffed animals.

My heart aches looking at her. All I’ve ever wanted was for her to have a lovely, peaceful, normal childhood.

If she’s a Seer, she won’t have that, and it breaks my heart.

With a sigh, I creep into her room and lean down, pulling a blanket over her. I kiss her cheek and brush her hair aside, smiling when she giggles in her sleep.

“Sleep well, sweetie,” I whisper as I turn out her light.

“Cleo, do you know where your dance shoes are? We don’t want to be late for your class today!” I call out, checking my watch for the third time. I’ve been sending Cleo to a special sports academy preschool once a week for the last year. It’s donewonders for her social abilities and the emphasis on physical exercise has helped with her crazy energy levels.

“Mama, you can’t go to the hospital. You can’t,” Cleo says, appearing behind me. Her dance shoes are gripped in her hand so tightly that her little knuckles are white. She looks terrified.

“Honey, what are you talking about?” I ask, kneeling down to pry her shoes out of her hand.

“Promise me you won’t go,” she cries, flinging herself into my arms. Her hot tears soak my shoulder and I hold her tightly. “I don’t want you to die.”

“Honey, no one is going to die. And I’m not scheduled at the hospital today. I’m going to work at the clinic. Let’s get you to class, okay?” I brush away her tears and help her put on her shoes.

She drags her feet as we walk to the car, her little sniffles breaking my heart each step of the way.

We make the short drive to the academy and I help her out of her booster seat and hand her the pink dance bag.

“You promise you won’t go?” she asks, solemnly. I kneel down to her level and give her a hug. “I promise, honey. Now go have fun at the dance, okay?”

I watch as she walks off toward her dance studio and give her a little wave when she turns back.

My anxiety is sky high as I get into the car. She’s having visions. Terrible visions. What if they’re true? But they can’t be, right? I don’t work at the hospital. I work at the Ruby Clinic. Maybe this is all just a coincidence...

I navigate out onto the freeway and make my way toward Ruby Clinic. As I reach my exit, my phone rings and I answer it on the hands free.

“This is Yelena,” I say as I merge onto the exit.

“Yelena, thank God. Are you on your way in?” Dr. Taylor asks. He sounds frantic.

“Yes, Doctor. I’m about ten minutes away. What happened?” I ask.

“A passenger train derailed at rush hour. There were multiple casualties. Many injured. We’re sending everyone we have to help up at the hospital. Can you make it over there?”

My blood runs cold, and I swallow hard. The hospital. The one place Cleo made me swear I wouldn’t go.

“Yelena, did you hear me?” Dr. Taylor says again, his voice tight with worry.

“I heard you, Doctor,” I answer quietly. My heart is torn. As a healer, I’m duty-bound to assist where I can. All those people suffering...if I could help them, I know where I need to be.

But Cleo...she's my life. Her vision saw me dying if I went to the hospital. That's horrifying too.

I take a deep breath and pray to the Moon Goddess, asking for whatever grace she might give me.

My decision is clear.

"I can be at the hospital in twenty minutes," I tell him.

"Good. We'll see you there."

I hang up the call and grip the steering wheel.

Moon Goddess, protect me. Please.

Chapter Twenty One

Austin

"Austin? Austin is this you?"

I grip my phone tightly to my ear as the tiny voice comes through the receiver. "Yes, this is Austin," I answer. There's a lump in my throat. When I left my card at Yelena's last night, I figured she would throw it away. I never dreamed that Cleo would call.

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She sniffles, and it sounds an awful lot like a sob.

“Cleo?” I ask tentatively.

“It’s Mama,” she wails. “She’s in danger. I don’t want her to die.”

My pulse pounds in my chest, and I reach for the keys to my truck.

“Cleo, sweetheart, where are you? What’s happening?”

“I’m at dance, but Mama is at the hospital. There’s so much blood!” she continues, sobbing.

The hospital? Panic fills me, and I tear out the door. I can’t lose Yelena. Not like this.

“Who am I speaking with?” a stern voice comes over the phone.

I fumble with my keys and almost drop the phone.

“I’m a friend of Yelena’s. Is Cleo safe?” I ask brusquely.

“She is. Is her mother okay?” the voice asks, quietly. I can no longer hear Cleo’s crying, so I have to assume the teacher has helped her.

“That’s what I’m going to find out. Please, take care of her and tell her that I won’t let anything happen to her mama,” I promise her before hanging up the call.

I pull out of my driveway and speed down the road. My mind is racing with concern. If anything happens to my mate....

"I'm coming, Yelena," I mutter to myself as I turn toward the freeway. With a prayer to the Moon Goddess for protection, I press on the gas and rocket toward the hospital.

Just let her be okay. Please, Moon Goddess. Let her be okay.

The trees whizz by. I can hardly believe Cleo called me to ask for my help. It warms my heart that she knew she could turn to me and that she found my card.

I smile to myself. She's a special kid, and I hope and pray that I'll be able to see her grow up in the pack. I may have missed the first five years of her life, but I don't want to miss any more of it. I want to be there when she starts school in the little pack schoolhouse. I want to run with her when she meets her wolf and teach her about the woods. I can't wait to introduce her to her extended family and watch as she thrives.

And, if she is the new Seer, I desperately need to protect her. To guard her and keep her safe from any and all who would harm her or use her for her talents. I want to be the one who stands between her and the world and gives her the space to learn her gift.

I want to be her Dad.

Traffic is heavy as I get to the exit for the hospital. Police cars and ambulances line the road. My senses go on high alert and my wolf paces in my chest. I reach deep inside, checking the bond I have with Yelena.

Something's wrong. It feels...off. Horror fills me as I think of all the possibilities.

I need to get to her. I have to find out if she's okay. I drum my fingers nervously on

my steering wheel, desperate to get to her.

The road is blocked by a large fire truck and police officers who are taping off the road, so I quickly turn down a side street and park in an alley. As much as my wolf is clamoring to be let out, it's too dangerous to shift in the city. Instead, I jam my ball cap on my head and take off at a run. My shifter abilities let me run faster than the average human, and I take full advantage whenever I can.

I make it across the hospital parking lot before I hear the screams. The closer I get to the emergency room door, the more chaotic the scene in front of me becomes.

There are people everywhere. Some are bleeding, some are uniformed and trying to help. The scent of blood, gasoline, and fear is heavy in the air.

I move quickly, darting through patients and personnel who are gathered in the outdoor triage area. I don't know where to start my search. People push and shove, shouting over each other to be heard.

The pandemonium makes my head ache.

A damaged SUV comes screeching up behind me, and I leap out of the way at the last minute. A blood-covered man jumps out and pulls a small child out of the car, carrying him in his arms and running for the doors.

The security guard waves him through, and I take my chance, following him inside. The little boy in his arms is bleeding heavily from a head wound, and it makes me immediately think of Cleo.

What if something like this happens to her? How would I cope with seeing her injured like that?

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I try to use my wolf senses to seek out Yelena, but the scents are all too overwhelming in the emergency room.

Shouts and cries echo throughout the space as medical staff rush to aid the injured.

I round a corner and there: her scent. Faint but unmistakable. I follow it, weaving between patients and staff until I reach a set of double doors.

“Move!” someone yells, and I turn, diving out of the way as two paramedics rush a gurney through the hallway.

Someone screams from beyond the doors, raising my hackles.

Taking the chance, I follow the gurney and slip past the double doors. The main treatment area is bustling, with injured people everywhere. Harried-looking doctors and nurses rush to andfro. The only good thing about this situation is that no one has noticed me or asked why I’m here.

I breathe deeply, trying to pick Yelena’s scent out from the crowd.

I slip through them into a quieter ward, the sounds of chaos fading behind me. Her scent grows stronger, a beacon guiding me to her.

The screaming starts again, and soon, a flood of people come running out of the far hallway.

“Call security! He has a knife!” someone yells.

The surrounding people push and shove to get out of the way. But, unlike them, I move forward toward the disturbance.

The closer I get, the stronger Yelena's scent is. I push past a nurse and round the corner. I see movement out of the corner of my eye and a flash of bright pink. If I didn't know better, I swear I just saw Sylvie. But when I scan the area, she's nowhere to be found.

"Hurry! Yelena's still in there!" I hear a nurse cry on the phone.

Yelena.

I surge forward, jogging down the hall until I reach the final treatment room. I can hear her before I can see her.

"You don't want to do this. It's going to be okay. I promise we'll do the best we can to help her. Just put down the knife," Yelena coaxes.

I peek through the door to assess the situation. What I see makes me clench my fists and see red.

An old woman is lying in the hospital bed, and she looks unconscious. Yelena is hovering over her, blocking her with her body, while a young, deranged-looking man is crowding her and waving a knife. His face is twisted in pain and distress, but there's blood dripping off the knife, and there's blood on Yelena's scrubs.

My wolf doesn't allow me to hesitate. Someone hurt our mate. I have to respond.

In a flash, I'm in the room. Both the man and Yelena gasp and whirl around at my presence.

I growl and stalk forward, grabbing the man by his wrist and twisting, sharply. A crack sounds, and he howls with pain. His knife clatters to the floor.

“Go to the door, Yelena,” I order, keeping my eyes glued on the man who hurt my mate.

He’s trying to cradle his injured wrist, but as soon as Yelena scoots by, he launches himself at me. I dodge him easily, catching the back of his shirt and slamming him up against the wall.

“You touched her, and for that, you will pay,” I growl in his ear.

He jams his head backward toward my nose, but I’m too fast for him. I wrap my arm around his throat and squeeze, stopping only when he goes limp. When he slumps to the floor, I quickly pocket the knife and hurry over to Yelena. She’s holding herself and looking terrified.

“Talk to me. Are you hurt? Are you okay?” I ask her urgently, scanning her for any more visible signs of injury. My hands are on her shoulders, and I can feel her shaking.

“Yelena, baby, talk to me,” I plead.

“It’s just a scratch. I’m fine,” she whispers, finally, “But I was so scared.”

I pull her into a hug, smoothing her hair and holding her as she shakes.

“How did you find me?” she asks when she pulls away.

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The security guard bursts into the room, interrupting us, and we hurry out, motioning to the attacker on the floor. I lead Yelena back out into the hall while they attend to him.

“Cleo called me,” I say, keeping my eyes locked on her. She pales and leans against the wall for support.

“Cleo? How?” she demands.

“I guess she found my card on the table. I don’t know. But she called me from school. Her teacher said she would be watching her until you came to get her. Yelena, Cleo was so upset. She was crying and so worried that you were going to die.”

Yelena gasps, her hand coming up to her face. “I have to go. I need to get to her. She’s going to be frantic.”

“Come on. We’ll take my truck,” I tell her, digging my keys out of my pocket. Yelena nods, and I grab her hand as we navigate through the hospital.

“Do you need to tell someone you’re leaving?” I ask as she stops by the employee locker room. She shakes her head. “I’ll send my boss a text. I just need to grab my bag and my coat.”

I wait outside the door, pacing until she returns.

We hurry back out through the parking lot toward the alley where my truck is parked. Yelena’s face is hard to read, but there’s tension rolling off her.

As soon as we get to the truck, she hands me her phone. The map app is already running with directions to Cleo's school.

"Austin," she says, looking over at me as she buckles up. "Hurry, please."

"On it," I reply, reversing and pulling out to the main road.

Thankfully, Cleo's school isn't too far away and we make good time. As soon as we arrive, tires screeching on the pavement, Yelena grips the door handle, ready to jump out.

I barely come to a complete stop when she leaps out of the truck and runs down the sidewalk toward the front door. I follow after her, catching up as she talks animatedly to the receptionist.

"Mama!" a little voice calls out, and I turn just in time to see Cleo running full speed down the hall toward Yelena. Yelena kneels down, arms wide, and catches her in a giant hug. They both are crying, and it makes my wolf even more anxious to gather them up, claim them, and protect them. They are ours.

It's several minutes before Yelena and Cleo have calmed down enough to release each other. We wave goodbye to the curious receptionist and make our way back to the truck.

"Oh no! I don't have a safety seat for Cleo," I say when we get there. I want to kick myself for forgetting that crucial component. What kind of father forgets about that kind of thing?

"Just this once, we'll be fine. We need to be home," Yelena says quietly. I help her and Cleo into the back seat of the truck and then climb in and head toward Yelena's house.

This time, I drive under the speed limit, hyper-aware that my child and my mate are vulnerable right now.

Yelena and Cleo have their heads together and are whispering back and forth. I can't quite make out what they are saying but I am relieved when I hear them both laugh. They're going to be okay.

Once inside, Yelena goes to shower and change, and Cleo and I make sandwiches together in the kitchen.

"You rescued Mama," Cleo says as she carefully spreads jelly on a piece of bread.

"Because you warned me, kiddo," I tell her, handing her the peanut butter. "So I think that means you rescued her."

Cleo doesn't say anything else, and I wonder if she saw this. I want to ask her, but I don't think Yelena will be pleased if I talk to her about her Seer abilities right now.

Finally, Yelena emerges, dressed in a comfortable pair of leggings and a button down flannel shirt that looks very, very familiar.

I stare at her as a rush of emotions floods through me. She looks so beautiful and vulnerable, and I'm overwhelmed with the urge to hold her, to comfort her. But I don't think she would be receptive to that. At least not right now.

My wolf is ecstatic, seeing our mate seeking solace in something of ours. It gives me hope, even though I'm still haunted by memories of the past, of when things went so wrong between us.

"Mama!" Cleo says, running over to her and giving her a giant hug. "I told you not to go to the hospital." Tears are dripping down Cleo's cheeks, and it breaks my heart.

Yelena meets my eyes over her little girl's head and then she looks down at Cleo. "Honey, did you see what happened today before it happened?" she asks carefully.

Cleo pales but doesn't answer. I crouch down next to her and put a comforting hand on her back.

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“Can you try to remember?” I ask quietly.

Cleo looks at me and then over at Yelena. She sighs. “It’s the dreams,” she says, her voice so quiet and small. “I see things in them. And sometimes they happen.”

Yelena chokes back a sob, and I reach over with my other hand and rub her shoulder. This pretty much confirms our suspicions. Cleo is definitely the new Seer.

“What does that mean? Is it bad?” Cleo asks, climbing into Yelena’s lap.

Yelena is now crying, so I take Cleo’s hands and smile at her. “No, sweet girl. It’s not bad. It just means you have a Gift. That’s all.”

Cleo screws up her face. “Having bad dreams is a present? I don’t like that. I would rather have a stuffed animal or a toy truck.”

I laugh and shake my head. “No, not like a present. As you grow up, we’ll teach you more about it. But for now, you should tell your mom about every bad dream you have, okay?”

Cleo studies me but then nods and moves to stand.

“I want to go draw,” she tells Yelena. Yelena snuffles but nods, and Cleo heads off toward her room.

I scoot closer to her and put my arm around her shoulders, pulling her into my embrace. To my surprise and satisfaction, Yelena leans into me, resting her head on

my shoulder.

“Thank you,” she whispers, “For everything today.”

I pull her tighter and press a kiss to the top of her head. “I’m in this, Yelena. For you. For Cleo. Forever.”

“Cleo is a Seer,” she sobs, wrapping her arms around me.

I comfort her as she sobs, drenching my shirt with her tears.

“She is,” I whisper, “But she’s not alone. She has you to protect her. And me. I’ll always protect her, Yelena. You have my word.”

Yelena pulls back enough to look at me. Even like this, with tear-streaked cheeks and red-rimmed eyes, she’s still the most beautiful woman in the world to me.

“Yelena,” I whisper, my eyes dropping to her lips.

She leans forward just enough, and I shift my arms so I am cupping the back of her head.

Seeing her like this, vulnerable and needing me, makes my decision easy. I close the small distance between us and press my lips to hers.

The kiss starts out soft and tentative, both of us uncertain. But soon, passion flares, our hurt and fear fading away as we lose ourselves in each other. My hands tangle in her hair as I deepen the kiss, drinking her in. She clings to me just as fiercely, kissing me with an intensity that steals my breath.

We break apart gasping, foreheads touching. The air is charged between us. As much

as I want to go further, I know I shouldn't. Yelena isn't ready for that, and I refuse to ruin my precious second chance with her. I need to show her that I'm different now. That I'm ready to be the man she deserves.

"I should go," I whisper, pressing a kiss to her forehead. "And you probably want to check on Cleo."

She blinks, surprised, but nods. "Okay," she whispers back, scrambling to her feet.

To my surprise, she holds out her hand. "Come with me?"

I let her pull me to my feet and together we went to check on Cleo.

My heart feels full. I know I'm on the right path.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Yelena

The last two weeks have felt like a dream. Since the incident at the hospital and Cleo's first confirmed vision, I've taken a leave from work. I can't bear to be away from Cleo for more than an hour or two. Until we know how her Seer powers will manifest and what will happen next, I just can't risk her accidentally revealing anything. I love my job, but my child is my first priority.

She and I are inseparable, spending the days baking cookies, making art, and...spending time with Austin.

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He spends every day with us, sometimes the entire day.

It just sort of happened. He shows up around breakfast time, usually with donuts or treats, and leaves after Cleo's bedtime.

He fits into our little life so well, that it's actually a little unnerving.

But watching him with Cleo makes my heart swell. He's so good with her and she adores him. We've fallen into the habit of all sitting together after dinner and playing a board game or putting together a puzzle, like we're a real family. He helps me put Cleo to bed, sometimes telling her wild stories about a big black wolf and his adventures in the woods. I recognize what he's doing, and I am grateful for it. He's telling her our history—the history of our pack and our ancestors, without telling her that she's a shifter too.

My wolf is ecstatic, practically begging me to make this real and forever. She loves having Austin close and I know when it's time for him to go back to the pack, she's going to mourn.

If I'm being honest, Austin leaving will be hard on all of us, including Cleo.

Last night, after Cleo went to bed, we just sat and talked on the porch with a cup of cocoa and leftover cupcakes. It wasn't the first time we'd done that in the last few weeks, but last night felt different.

Austin has changed. He's no longer the selfish, immature boy that I left. He's turned into a man. An Alpha I can be proud of. He's kind, caring, protective, and supportive.

He's reiterated multiple times how proud he is of me and my career. He's shown his love over and over to Cleo, treating her as his daughter without question. The effort he's put into supporting Cleo and I these last few weeks is incredible.

He even brought up the past last night without me having to do it.

I replay his words in my mind as I sip my tea.

"It was my fault, Yelena. All of it. I didn't see you, then. I was too consumed with my own issues to see you. And I have regretted that every single day since. The way I treated you, rejecting you and the love you showed me? It's shameful and it will take a lifetime to make it up to you, if you'll even let me."

At the time, his words floored me. I couldn't even respond because I was so shocked. To have Austin admit wrongdoing would have been unheard of back then. I never expected to hear an apology like this or even an acknowledgment of the pain that he caused me.

It's melted the ice around my heart and let me hope. Maybe...this could work. Maybe this is our second chance. Maybe forgiveness is possible.

My wolf is more than ready. I just don't know if I am.

He rejected me, forcing me to live a lonely life before I had to leave to save myself. That pain is still fresh. Being away from him, our pack, having to raise my child alone and seek a life out for us.

It's a lot.

And yet...the fact remains that he is my mate. The father of my child. And the one I've loved for years.

I know this. I've always known this. We were Fated to be together by the Moon Goddess herself. Chosen for each other. There is no one else out there for me that will complete me the way he will. Complete our family.

Don't I owe it to myself, my wolf, and Cleo to take this final chance and try?

Each day that I spend with him makes my feelings grow stronger...and more complicated.

He's changed. Go to him. Tell him how you feel. Tell him the truth about Cleo.

I drain my tea and drum my fingers on the counter. Susan is due to come pick Cleo up to take her to her art class in fifteen minutes. They will be gone for an hour.

If I wanted to talk to Austin privately, this would be the best time to do it. A little flutter starts up in my stomach.

I wonder what he'll say when I tell him. I'm not blind. The kisses we've shared have been electric, and the chemistry between us is as strong as ever.

He's been respectful of my boundaries, not pushing anything. It's made me want him more.

Decision made, I head up the stairs to get changed. If I'm going to do this, I want to look my best. For my mate.

Nerves pool in my belly as I watch Susan and Cleo pull out of the driveway. Austin's truck is parked in his driveway, and I can see it from my front porch.

All I have to do is walk over there and tell him. Easy peasy.

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Except, my feet feel like lead as I take one step and then another. My mind races with unfounded anxiety. What if he rejects me again? What if I read this wrong?

I stop on the sidewalk, hold my moonstone charm in my hands and take a deep, cleansing breath.

I let the calm wash over me as I focus on the facts: he's my Fated Mate, I never stopped loving him, and he's Cleo's father.

Encouraged, I stride toward his door and knock.

After a minute, he opens it and looks at me in surprise. He's shirtless, wearing a pair of faded blue jeans. His hair is still damp from a shower and the stubble on his face is darker than normal.

The flutter in my core makes me warm, and I blush.

"Yelena! Please, come in," he invites, standing aside so I can enter his house.

It's sparsely furnished, but that's being expected. He's here temporarily, not forever.

He gestures for me to have a seat on the small couch while he disappears into the kitchen. I smile at him when he returns with two mugs of tea and sets them on the coffee table.

He joins me on the couch with a smile.

“Where’s Cleo?” he asks, leaning back against the cushions. The angle puts his muscular frame on display, and I have to force myself to look at his face instead of his abs.

“She’s at art class with Susan,” I say, reaching for my tea to hide my reaction to him.

“She’s so artistic. It’s great,” he says, giving me a warm smile. My nerves feel like they are going haywire, but I try to steel myself.

“Austin,” I say softly, reaching out to touch his knee. His hand immediately covers mine and sends shivers down my spine. I don’t know how to tell him what I want to say so I take a deep breath and blurt it out:

“Cleo is your daughter.”

He stills for a second, breathing shallow. I swallow hard. Is he upset? Oh my god, did I read this wrong?

“I already think of her as mine,” he says softly. “Because she’s yours, and I suspected that she was mine, but thank you for telling me.”

My heart catches in my throat as he smiles at me.

“I am overjoyed to know that she is also mine. She is an incredible child and one that I will love and protect for the rest of my days. You have my word on that, Yelena. For the rest of my days.”

Tears well in my eyes, and I look down at my hands which are knotted in my lap.

“I found out I was pregnant right after...after we broke up. I knew she was yours, that there was no one else. There could never be anyone else. You’re her father and...my

mate," I confess.

His eyes flash and his body tenses at my words.

“Put your tea down,” he says.

I blink, baffled by the odd request, but I do as he asks. The second my mug touches the coffee table, he hauls me into his arms, lifting me until I’m straddling him.

“I love you, mate,” he growls, his silver eyes looking almost molten. “And I love our family. Both of you are mine. Forever.”

He pulls my head down, meeting my lips in a savage kiss.

I melt into his touch, my hands tangling in his damp hair as our lips and tongues collide. His hands grip my hips, pulling me even closer until there's no space left between us.

I can feel his rapid heartbeat and the heat of his skin through my thin shirt. My wolf howls inside, overjoyed to finally be back in our mate's arms.

When we break for air, panting, I press my forehead to his.

"I love you too," I whisper. "I never stopped, even when I had to leave. It's always been you and it always will be."

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His eyes flash with regret. "I know, and I hate myself for what I put you through. But I promise, I will spend the rest of my life making it up to you and our daughter."

My heart swells and I capture his lips again, unable to get enough of his taste and touch.

His hands slide under my shirt, caressing the sensitive skin of my back and sides as I grind my hips against him. I shiver, heat pooling low in my belly.

I tear my lips from his and trail hot kisses down his neck, breathing in his intoxicating scent. My mate.

"I need you," I whimper against his skin.

With a possessive growl, he stands up from the couch, lifting me effortlessly in his arms. I wrap my legs around his waist as he carries me to the bedroom. I giggle when he kicks open the door and we both tumble onto his bed in a tangle of limbs.

"These clothes need to go," he mutters, pulling at my jeans.

I wiggle out of my clothing with his help and then unbutton his jeans, pushing them down off his hips.

My fingers trace over the hard lines of his abs and chest as I press my body against him.

"I've missed you," he whispers against my lips before capturing them in another

searing kiss. “So damn much.”

Even though we’ve only been intimate once, there’s a familiarity with him, a potent memory in the way our bodies fit perfectly together. It ignites a fire within me that has been smoldering for far too long. Our hands roam over each other's skin, rediscovering every curve and dip as if it were for the first time.

He pulls away briefly to trail light kisses down my neck and collarbone before settling on one of my breasts, swirling his tongue around my nipple. My back arches and I moan loudly, feeling myself growing wet with need.

His hand slides between us, stroking me as I grind against him in desperation. His eyes meet mine and I see nothing but love and desire reflected back at me.

“Please,” I beg breathlessly. I rake my nails down his back, and he shudders, eyes glowing silver with lust and passion.

All the years of longing and heartbreak seemed to dissolve in this perfect moment.

Every touch, every kiss, every gasp of pleasure feels like a million little sparks igniting within me. I cling to him, wanting to be as close as possible, wanting to feel every inch of his skin against mine.

His lips continue their path down my body, leaving a trail of heat, kisses, and nibbles in their wake.

“I want you more than anything in the world,” he murmurs against my skin, his voice husky with desire. “And I desperately need to taste you.”

He spreads my thighs apart, exposing me to him fully. His silver eyes darken with desire as he looks up at me, and I see a hunger in them that hasn't been satisfied in

years. It spurs me on, makes me wetter for him.

I gasp when his lips find my center, his tongue flicking over my sensitive clit. I arch up, grinding my hips against his face. He growls, low and primal and the warmth in my core spreads from my head to my toes.

"You taste so fucking good, Yelena," he moans against me before plunging his tongue inside of me.

He feasts on me like a starving man, lapping at my folds and sucking on my clit in a way that sends little jolts of heat up my spine.

I grip the sheets above my head, nails digging into the soft comforter as pleasure courses through my entire body.

"Austin," I pant, "I can't. It's too much."

He growls against my folds and slides a thick finger inside me, then a second, curling them in just the right way to make me gasp in pleasure.

I call out his name, thrashing on the bed in pleasure as he continues his ministrations.

My hips buck against his face as I whimper his name over and over again. My legs shake uncontrollably from the need building inside of me.

"Austin...Oh God...I'm...I'm..." I can't finish my sentence. Stars explode behind my eyes and a wave of pure ecstasy washes over me.

Holy fuck.

I can barely get my breath back before he pulls back and flips us over so that I am on

top of him and my hair falls around us like a curtain. I lean down and kiss him, rocking my hips against his hard length. I can taste my own arousal on his lips. It spurs me on further.

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I want him buried inside me and to feel that explosion of pleasure, but I feel suddenly shy. I've never been good at asking for what I want, and it feels awkward.

"Hey," he whispers, framing my face and forcing me to look at him when I try to turn away. "What's wrong?"

I shake my head and grind against him, desperate. Everything about him makes me feel hot and needy, and yet, his familiar scent and the bond between us make me feel so safe. Cherished. Loved.

It gives me the confidence to be bold.

"I want you," I whisper, biting my lower lip. "All of you."

He smiles a slow smile and then reaches between us, fisting his cock in his hand and stroking, before moving his hands to my hips. He lifts me up, his hands gripping me tightly, as he guides me onto him.

I moan loudly as he fills me completely, the sensations overwhelming and intense. He thrusts up into me, setting a rhythm that has my body trembling with pleasure.

I start to move with him, feeling every inch of him inside me. Our eyes lock and I can see the love and desire burning brightly in them.

"You feel so good," he groans, his breathing becoming ragged as I ride him faster.

My hands grip onto his shoulders as he whispers dirty words into my ear. It's

intoxicating and impossible to resist.

Our moans and gasps fill the air as we let go of all inhibitions and give in to the primal desire that has been building between us for years.

“Oh, god, Austin, right there,” I moan as he thrusts up. His hand reaches between us again, his thumb finding my clit and rubbing it with small circles.

My whole body feels alive with pleasure, and I know I am close to reaching my peak.

“Come for me,” he whispers huskily in my ear and that’s all it takes for me to shatter into a million pieces. The wave of pleasure crashes over me as he continues to move inside me until he reaches his own release. I cry out when he comes inside me, filling me with his seed.

We lay there panting and spent, our bodies tangled together in a mess of sheets and limbs.

“When does Cleo come home?” he asks, his breath heavy.

I turn to him. “At three,” I say with a yawn. He glances over at his phone on the bedside table.

“We’ve still got twenty minutes,” he says, with a devilish grin. “I know just how to spend it.”

He kisses me softly before trailing down my body once again. This time, I let out little giggles as he tickles my sides with gentle kisses.

“I love this,” he says against my skin. “Being able to make you laugh like this. Touching you.”

“I love it too,” I reply with a smile. “But mostly I just love you.”

He meets my eyes again and we both know that these words are promises we’re making to each other. It may not be a formal mating ceremony, but to us? These whispered words are our vows to each other. The journey has been hard, but we’ve survived it and come out the other side.

This is what I want...forever.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Yelena

The sweet aroma of chocolate chip pancakes fills the kitchen, along with the sizzle of bacon. I hum a cheerful tune to myself as I finish setting the table and preparing for our breakfast. The first breakfast as a family of three.

Last night was incredible. My body is tired and sore, but in all the right places.

Austin loves me and is ready to finally accept our mate bond. He loves Cleo and can’t wait to be her Dad.

For the first time in years, I’m filled with hope.

I pour three glasses of orange juice and set them aside. The front door opens, and I look up, smiling when I see Austin come in the door. He’s carrying a small bouquet of pink flowers.

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He walks over and kisses me hello. “Do you think she’ll like these?” he asks, nervously. “I wanted to have something for her.”

I look down at the delicate pink flowers and my heart threatens to burst.

He’s so different now. Before, the idea of him buying flowers or even kissing me hello would have been absurd. But now...

“She’ll love them. Let me get a vase,” I say, leaning up to kiss his cheek.

I can’t stop touching him. My wolf and I have been starved for physical contact for the years that we’ve lived apart. Even casual touches, like brushing past him in the kitchen or the way he reaches out to tuck my hair behind my ear, make me feel warm and fuzzy inside.

“So, we’ll tell her at breakfast?” Austin confirms, sneaking a slice of bacon out of the pan. I swat at him playfully with the spatula but nod in agreement.

“She needs to know as soon as possible so she can adjust. There are a lot of changes coming up for her,” I say, biting my lip anxiously.

There’s a rustling coming from the hallway, so I shoo Austin away from me and hurry to put food on plates.

“Good morning, Mama,” Cleo says, sleepily. “Oh, chocolate chip pancakes!”

I walk over to give her a hug good morning. “We have a guest this morning,” I tell

her, pointing at Austin.

He is holding the vase of flowers and looking uncharacteristically out of his element.

“Hi, Cleo,” he says, awkwardly. “I brought you these. Pretty flowers for the pretty princess!”

She brightens and comes over to look at them.

“Thank you,” she says politely. She looks at me, and then looks at Austin and a small smile creases her face.

“Austin,” she whispers, beckoning him to bend down. “Is today the day you tell me the news?” she whispers loudly.

Austin freezes and I stop what I’m doing to watch. He looks over at me and then back down at Cleo, and swallows hard, kneeling down so he’s at her level.

“What news is that, half-pint?” he asks carefully.

“You brought me the pink flowers, just like in my dream,” she says happily, “So I know you’re going to tell me news!”

Austin and I exchange a panicked glance, but before I can intervene, she launches herself at him, and he catches her in a big hug.

“My dreams tell the truth. Last time I dreamed that a big man with cookies would come visit me and tell me he’s my dad, and then you showed up and you had cookies”

Austin swallows hard. “And does that mean you think I’m your dad?” he asks,

quietly.

She giggles and frames his face with her tiny hands. “I know you’re my dad, silly!” she exclaims. “And I’m glad you are. You’re fun. And you make Mama all glowy and happy. I want you to do that all the time.”

Austin hugs her tightly to him and I feel a tear slip down my cheek.

“I love you, Cleo,” he whispers, fiercely. She pats his back and then steps back, looking at me expectantly.

“So, when are we moving back home?” she asks, walking over to the table.

Austin and I exhale and move to sit at the table with her, each of us filling our plates before we

answer.

“We’re going home soon,” I say, hesitantly. “We’re all going to live together, you, me, and...your dad.”

She beams and shoves a huge bite of chocolate chip pancake in her mouth.

“Is that where the wolves live?”

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I choke on my glass of orange juice but Austin steps in, reaching over to pat my hand reassuringly.

“What do you know of the wolves, princess?” he asks, softly.

She shrugs. “Not much. I just dream of them sometimes. Especially this great big black one. He’s nice to me and I think he’s the biggest of the wolves. Then, sometimes I dream about living with them. Like, we’re all wolves. Even Mama. She’s such a pretty wolf.”

Austin cracks a smile and looks at me. “Your Mama would be a very pretty wolf, wouldn’t she?” he asks.

She nods, solemnly, and he continues, “When we go home, you’re going to learn a lot more about the wolves. I promise. They are very important to us and our history.”

She looks at me and then back at Austin. “Does that mean that I can run in the woods? In my dream, I got to run in the woods with the big, black wolf!”

Austin reaches out and pats her hand. “I can’t wait to show you the woods, princess. There’s so much that you’re going to get to see.”

It took seven days for us to pack up my life in the city, quit my job at Ruby Clinic, and make arrangements to move back to the pack’s land. My father came to help us pack and spend time with his granddaughter while Austin took care of some Pack

affairs. A part of me feels sad that I will see my father less now. He still doesn't come onto the pack properly, but I assure him we'll make the trip to see him as often as we can.

Cleo has adjusted to the news that wolf shifters exist and that she is one, with surprising calm. Her biggest concern is what color her wolf will be when she finally gets her wolf. She constantly asks when it will happen and when she will get to shift like us. I reassure her that it will happen when the time is right, and that it doesn't matter what color her wolf is, because she will always be our little princess.

But I can understand her impatience. I remember how eager I was to shift for the first time, to feel the power of my wolf coursing through my veins. It's an indescribable feeling, like a part of you that you never knew existed suddenly comes to life.

Austin, on the other hand, has been more hesitant. It took her begging for two days before he agreed to shift in front of her. He was so worried that she would be terrified of him. But, after she told him that his wolf is what makes her feel safe during her bad dreams, he finally did it. The look on her face was priceless when his majestic, black wolf stood in our living room.

I almost cried when she reached out, running her hands through his thick fur in wonder. It was a beautiful moment.

Now, she asks Austin to shift and lay with her every night while I read her bedtime story.

The look on his face when he heard that made me realize that Austin would stay in his wolf form permanently if it meant that his little girl felt safe.

Night after night, he shifts and they snuggle on the floor. I had to hide my laughter when she tried to make him do tricks in his wolf form like a pet dog.

The fact that he allows her to play and learn this way makes me love him anymore. To everyone else, he's the Alpha. The protector of the pack. He's fierce and unyielding when he has to be. But to us? He's our love. The man who will do anything for us.

Unfortunately, the news that Cleo is a Seer has been harder for her to understand. Teaching her to control her powers and exist in this new reality is not going to be easy. At least I can console myself with the fact that the pack will work with us to keep her safe.

I put the last bag in the bed of Austin's truck, and turn to face my little house. It's time to say goodbye and go back home.

Austin sent word ahead to the pack and let them know that we are coming. He told me a small celebration has been planned, but I'm still nervous about how we will be accepted.

Cleo keeps up a steady stream of conversation as we make the long drive back to the pack lands. Her silly questions keep the mood light and soon, I see the familiar roads that mark the boundary of pack property.

We're finally home.

Austin slows the truck as we enter the front gates. I raise my eyebrows when I see how many guards are posted by them. I look over at Austin with a question in my eyes, but he shakes his head quickly, his eyes going to the rearview mirror where he can see Cleo. Later, then.

"Are we here? Is this it?" she says excitedly, peering out the window.

"Welcome home to Nightwing Pack, baby," I say with a smile.

“To you as well,” Austin murmurs, reaching over to squeeze my knee. “Our Luna has finally come home.”

I flush red and my insides tingle at the way he looks at me. His Luna.

The future I once thought was lost, is now reality. It’s a little hard to wrap my head around.

“Mama, mama look! There’s wolves! I see them! In the trees!” Cleo shrieks. I crane my head and smile when I see the pups playing in the meadow by the road. They aren’t too much older than Cleo, in the first or second year of their shift. They tumble and race through the grass and trees with wild abandon.

I look back at my daughter and I know that will be her soon.

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When we turn onto the main street, I'm surprised to see a giant "Welcome Home" banner stretched out across the road, tied between two huge trees.

People, my packmates, line the street and cheer as we slow to a crawl.

"Your pack welcomes you," Austin says with a smile.

I give a little wave and try to calm my racing heart. When we park, people swarm the car, forcing Austin to use his Alpha influence to get people to back up.

Cleo clings to me, peering out at everyone with interest.

The former Alpha Malakai and Luna Elizabeth come rushing out to meet us. I hesitate for only a moment, unsure of the kind of welcome I will get now that they know I kept their granddaughter from them. Austin told me that they were overjoyed by the news when he told them, but I've still been anxious. However, as soon as Luna Elizabeth draws near, I know I needn't have worried. Her face is warm and welcoming as ever, a potent reminder that I'm truly home.

"Yelena, you're home," Luna Elizabeth says, crushing me to her chest in a bear hug. "Thank the Moon Goddess." I wrap my arms around her as well, hugging her tightly.

When we pull back, I tug on Cleo's hand and pull her forward. "This is Cleo," I tell her.

Luna Elizabeth's eyes fill with tears as she crouches down in front of Cleo.

“It’s very nice to meet you,” she says warmly. “I’m Elizabeth, your father’s mama. If you wanted, you could call me Nonna.”

Cleo studies her seriously for a moment before breaking out in a huge grin. “Nonna!” she exclaims, rushing to give her a hug.

Elizabeth embraces Cleo lovingly, tears of joy in her eyes as she holds her granddaughter for the first time. I look over to see Austin looking on with pride. My heart swells at the sight of his mother bonding with our child. Malakai looks on, his face a mixture of pride and uncertainty as he watches his granddaughter frolic and play. He’s never been one to be emotionally effusive, but something tells me that Cleo will have him wrapped around her finger in no time.

The reunion is interrupted by a commotion near the edge of the crowd. The pack parts to make way for Vincent, Austin's beta, who approaches with a grave expression.

I hurry to Austin’s side.

"Alpha," Vincent says urgently. "We must speak right away. The threat may be more serious than we realized."

Anxiety floods my veins, and I look to Austin. His face darkens and his smile disappears. Former Alpha Malakai looks alarmed as well.

Shit. What is happening right now?

Austin nods curtly at Vincent before turning back to me and Cleo.

"I'm sorry, my loves, but duty calls," he says, motioning for his mom to come over. “Mom, can you help them get settled?” he asks.

She nods, but I turn to Austin with worry in my eyes.

“Tell me she’s going to be safe,” I whisper urgently. “Tell me the threat isn’t against Cleo.”

He kisses my cheek tenderly.

“Take Cleo and get settled back home. There was an unusual scent at the borders. Unknown wolf or wolves. We’re going to check it out, and then I’ll be home. You and Cleo will be safe here. I swear it.”

I don’t like the idea of an unknown wolf sniffing around our perimeter, but it does happen from time to time. With Cleo and I only recently arrived back on the pack’s land, it feels particularly ominous. Is it truly a visiting wolf or a rogue passing by, or is it a sign of something more nefarious? Could the news that Cleo is the new Seer have spread that quickly? Are they pushing at our boundaries because they want to get to her?

These questions, and more, press on my brain, almost to the point of overwhelming me. I look over at Austin and take a deep breath. Our mate is the Alpha. He will keep us safe.

My wolf whines in agreement and I manage a small smile and then go up on my tiptoes to kiss him quickly.

“Be safe, my love,” I whisper in his ear.

He squeezes my hand. “Always, my Luna.”

With that, he quickly shifts and bounds off, followed by Vincent. I watch them until they disappear beyond the tree line.

Elizabeth puts her arm around me reassuringly.

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"Come now, let's get you two home. Austin will take care of things, not to worry."

Chapter Twenty-Four

Austin

"And the wolf lived happily ever after in the woods."

I close the storybook and look down at my sleeping daughter nestled next to me on the loveseat. My heart almost explodes with joy and happiness. I have a family.

Carefully, I edge my hands underneath her and pick her up, carrying her to her bedroom. Yelena passes me in the hall, turning around to follow me and help me open the door.

The last few days have been chaotic as we get used to being in the pack again as a family. Everyone has come to visit and pay their respects to their new Luna, as well as meet Cleo. It's been wonderful, but exhausting. The challenges of dealing with the unknown wolf and securing our borders have been taking up much of my time. There are many nights when I come home so late that I miss Cleo's bedtime entirely. But, every night, Yelena is there to greet me. There's food waiting for me and a warm, listening ear.

Yelena is my rock, and this time, I am determined to make sure she knows just how happy and grateful I am for her support and for our little family. My work in these early days as Alpha is essential. Our pack has to know that I am prepared to lead and protect, but I hate how much it takes me away from my Luna and my child. Knowing

they are waiting for me at home makes it bearable. Still, the schedule has been taking a toll on us all. Cleo's sleep has been disrupted, and that means Yelena and I haven't been sleeping well either.

I place her down on her bed, hardly daring to breathe as I pull my hands away and Yelena quickly covers the young girl with a blanket.

We both creep out of the room, taking care to shut the door quietly.

"Nice job! We did it," Yelena whispers, giving me a kiss. "Want to have a glass of wine with me?"

I smile and walk with her, my hand at the small of her back.

"That sounds fantastic," I agree.

We open a bottle of red wine that was gifted to us as a mating present by Vincent, and snuggle in next to each other on the loveseat.

"When does the trainer get here?" Yelena asks, sipping at her wine.

"Next week. Aurelia comes highly recommended. She's one of the few trainers who is endorsed by the Shifter Council and the Coven Council. She's a powerful Seer and mentor. She will train Cleo well. I know it."

Yelena nods and toys with the stem of her glass. "I just want Cleo to be okay."

I nod, pulling her close to my chest. "We both want that, sweetheart. I think this is the right thing to do."

Yelena leans into me, and my wolf wants to howl with delight. He's been extremely

pleased by the recent change of events and how much contact we've had with our mate and overjoyed by our claiming her as our Luna.

We sit in silence for a while, savoring our wine and each other's company. It feels comfortable, natural even. Like we were supposed to be like this all along. Which, I guess, we kind of were.

I lean down to kiss her forehead, inhaling her sweet scent. Yelena looks up at me with a shy smile, causing my heart to skip a beat. With everything going on of late, it has been hard for us to find time for ourselves and connect as a couple.

"I'm sorry for being a dick all those years ago," I whisper.

She smiles. "We're here now and look what we have," she whispers back. "Perhaps the Moon Goddess predestined our journey this way for a reason. Not just for us, but for Cleo."

I nod in agreement, stroking her hair gently.

"Of course. We'll be there for her every step of the way."

Yelena snuggles closer to me, resting her head on my chest. Our bond thrums between us, pulsing with love and affection. It's still new and raw to have it so front and center in my soul, but already it feels like second nature to have her by my side. My wolf purrs contentedly at having his mate so close after years of longing for her.

"I'm so grateful for you," Yelena sighs contently. "I could stay like this forever,"

"Me too, my love," I reply, stroking her hair. "I'm grateful for you too."

She tips her face up to mine, and I stroke her jaw before leaning in slowly and

capturing her soft lips. I kiss her deeply, the bitter taste of the wine lingering on our tongues.

After everything we've been through to get here, having this moment together feels like nothing short of a miracle.

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She's mine. Forever and always. My mate.

Our kisses grow more heated, and I can feel my wolf stirring within me, brimming with possessiveness and desire for our mate.

My hands roam over Yelena's body, memorizing every curve and dip. She moans against my lips, her nails digging into my back as she pulls me closer.

I break the kiss to trail hot kisses down her neck, nipping at her skin lightly. She shivers, and I smile against her neck.

My hand slides under her shirt, feeling the warmth of her soft skin. Yelena twitches and squirms under my touch, and I growl softly in response.

"I need you, mate," I whisper against her skin, trailing kisses back up to her lips. "I need you right now."

Her eyes are dark with desire as she nods. I watch as she reaches for both of our wine glasses, carefully setting them aside.

I stand, pulling us toward the bedroom. We stumble into the bed, our kisses growing more desperate with each step.

Once we reach the bed, I give Yelena a gentle shove, forcing her on her back onto the pillows.

I lower myself onto Yelena, my body pressing against hers as our lips crash together

again. Her hands slide under my shirt, caressing my back and tracing the lines of my muscles.

Her body arches and grinds against mine, hungry for more contact.

I reach between us, allowing my fingers to find the edge of her shirt, and I pull it over her head, exposing her bare skin. She gasps softly as I continue to kiss lower, my hands exploring every curve.

Now that we've both accepted and cemented our bond, our bodies seem to instinctively move in perfect sync. It's like the bond pulsing between us is helping drive us together.

I smile down at her, taking in her beauty. Somehow, in the years we were apart, she seems to have grown even more beautiful.

When I take a nipple into my mouth, she gasps, and her hands find their way to my hair.

The desire rising through our bond is powerful, even my wolf howls within me, eager to claim our mate.

I continue my path down her stomach, pressing little kisses to her skin before I hook my fingers into the waistband of her pants and tug.

She helps, lifting her hips to allow me to slide them off. As soon as she's free, I kiss my way back up her leg, spreading her thighs wide as I reach her center.

Her pussy glistens before me, perfectly pink and already soaked.

I lean forward, brushing my nose against her clit. She gasps and whimpers, arching

her back to press herself closer to me.

“Is this what you want, my love?” I growl, licking her.

She whimpers again, moaning as I taste her and savor her sweetness. When I tease her, dipping my tongue between her folds, she squirms and moans. She reaches for me, as desperate for more contact as I am.

But I refuse to be rushed. We have years to make up for. Instead, I slow down and grip her thighs. Holding her in place, I slowly lick her, sucking on her clit until she’s gasping for release.

Only when she is writhing beneath me, her breath coming in short pants, and her fingers tangled in the sheets, do I let up and slide two fingers into her.

She’s drenched, and I can feel her pussy walls clench tightly around me as I bring her closer to completion.

“You feel so good, baby,” I murmur as I curl my fingers inside her while teasing her clit with my tongue.

Yelena moans loudly and thrashes on the bed.

“That’s it. You’re so close, aren’t you? Come for me, beautiful,” I whisper before I suck her clit between my lips.

She cries out, and her orgasm crashes over her. Her pussy contracts around my fingers as her release drenches my hand.

I quickly shed my clothing and lay beside her, propping myself up with a pillow. She looks over at me with a slow smile.

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I reach over and pull her on top of me, her legs straddling my waist. Her hair falls down like a curtain, shielding her from view as she gets situated.

“I don’t know...” she begins, as she leans over my chest. I reach behind her neck and pull her down for a quick kiss.

“Take what you want,” I tell her when she pulls back. “Whatever I have, whatever I am—it’s yours.”

She bites her lip and looks down between us, resting her hand on my chest, her fingers toying with my chest hair.

“You want me to ride you?” she asks, her eyes sparkling. My cock twitches, and I nod.

“Yeah, baby. I want you to use me to find your pleasure. I want to see you fall apart on top of me and scream out my name,” I purr.

She flushes slightly pink, but she bites her lip again and reaches down to palm my cock.

“Well then,” she smiles, lifting up so I’m notched at her entrance. “It’s a good thing I want that too.”

She sinks down on me, taking me in fully. I watch, mesmerized, as she closes her eyes, throwing her head back and uttering a moan of pleasure.

“Oh,” she gasps out. “God, that’s deep.”

I flex my hips, driving up into her, and she gasps again but bears down. She feels incredible like this, wrapped around my girth, her walls still fluttering with the aftershocks of her release.

"Whatever my mate wants, she gets," I grunt, fully sheathed inside her tight heat.

She begins to move, tentatively at first, before settling into a steady pace above me. I flex my hips, driving up and meeting her, thrust for thrust.

Soon, we’re both breathing heavily, and she’s slumped over my chest, her nails raking down my chest.

“I’m so close,” she whispers in my ear. I growl against her neck, nipping at the sensitive skin there.

"Mine," I rasp. "My mate. My Luna."

"Yours," she agrees breathlessly, tilting her head to give me better access. "Forever yours, Alpha."

The pressure is building within me, and I fight with my need for release. She feels too good. It’s hard to hold back, even though I’m determined to wait for her.

Sensing this, Yelena sets a frantic pace, pulling me impossibly deeper. I groan, my rhythm faltering and my arms trembling with the effort of holding back.

"Let go," she whispers. "I'm with you."

Her words undo me. With a few more powerful thrusts, I come undone, finding my

peak just as her back arches and she cries out.

“Austin,” she groans, her entire body trembling with pleasure, “Oh, my God, that was incredible. You are incredible.”

I pry open my eyes and pull her down to my chest, pressing a kiss on her lips.

“I love you, Yelena,” I whisper.

“I love you, too,” she whispers back.

I withdraw and grab my T-shirt to help clean us up. Once we’re clean, I gather her up and fit her against me, letting my eyes fall closed as we lay together.

She’s a perfect fit because she’s my perfect mate.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Yelena

“Luna, would you be able to grab that big box from my truck and bring it over here?” Sonia asks, giving me a tired smile as she rubs her pregnant belly. “I would, but I really need to sit down.”

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I shake my head and stand. “You shouldn’t be lifting anything else. Sit there and let us help you,” I admonish her kindly.

She sighs with relief and plops down in the nearest chair. I motion to Tiffany, and she quickly gets her a glass of water.

Once Sonia is taken care of, I hurry toward the gray truck she pointed at. It’s parked on the edge of the parking lot, and sure enough, a large orange box is sitting on the tailgate.

Hefting it with a grunt, I waddle my way back toward the sorting station. It’s heavy, but that just means that we’ve got more great donations.

Our annual School Supply Donation Drive is in full swing and it’s all hands on deck. As Luna, my job is to not only support Austin and our pack but also work with our neighboring communities on initiatives that give back.

This donation drive benefits so many less fortunate children and teachers in our community. It makes me proud to see the generosity of our pack play out in this way.

“Get off me, loser!”

“Get lost, pizza face!”

“Don’t call me that! You’re gonna regret it!”

The sound of a fist hitting flesh makes me whip around and I scan the parking lot,

looking for where it came from. Another whimper and then another hit makes me set the box down to investigate. We're at the community school, and there are lots of places to hide.

I let my wolf guide me as I hurry toward the sounds of the scuffle, my protective instincts kicking in. In the far corner of the parking lot, I see two young boys, one human, one wolf shifter, facing off. The human looks older and taller than the shifter, easily outweighing him. I look on in shock when I realize the human boy has the wolf shifter pinned against the brick wall of the school, his fist drawn back and ready to strike again.

The wolf shifter meets my eyes, and I see the golden glow flashing in them as he struggles to control his shift. If he changes forms here, it could expose us all.

"Hey!" I call out, marching toward them with my shoulders back and head high. "Break it up, now."

The human boy startles, not having noticed my approach, but he continues to lash out.

I pick up the pace, hurrying toward them in shock.

The human boy outweighs the shifter child, and he's clearly inflicting the most damage. I watch in horror when he succeeds in putting the young wolf in a headlock and begins raining blows down on him.

"Hey!" I shout, grabbing the human boy's arm before he can land another punch. "I said, that's enough!"

The boy tries to jerk away, but I hold firm, using just enough preternatural strength to keep him in place. The wolf boy's eyes flash amber as he glares up at the human, a

low growl building in his throat. I can sense the wolf inside him stirring, ready to lash out to protect itself.

He's just a pup, ten or eleven years old at most. There's a small rivulet of blood dripping down his cheek, and his lip is split open. Dirt covers his arms and legs, and the white T-shirt he's wearing is torn in several places.

Sure, his wolf will make sure he heals, but the pain in his eyes isn't just from physical injury. I don't recognize him, and I wonder if he's from one of the other packs.

My heart aches and I turn to the struggling boy in my grasp.

"What do you think you're doing?" I demand. He just glares at me sullenly, refusing to answer.

"He started it," the human mutters unconvincingly. "He's just a freak."

I level my best mom stare at him.

"I don't care who started it. I'm ending it. You don't use your fists to solve problems. I never want to see you acting like this again, do you understand me?"

The wolf shifter ducks his head, still breathing heavily. He lets out a vicious snarl at the insult, and I can tell he is struggling to restrain his wolf. I lay a gentle hand on his shoulder, willing him to stay calm.

"I think you both need to walk away and cool down," I say evenly. "Fighting won't solve anything."

The human boy scowls but turns and stalks off. I wait until he disappears around the corner before I crouch down to get a good look at this shifter child.

I soften my voice as I address him.

"Are you hurt?"

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He shakes his head, finally raising his eyes to meet mine. I reach to touch the gash on his face, and he flinches, backing away from me. I freeze. Someone has clearly hurt this boy before.

"Let me see," I say gently, putting my hand down. The wolf inside him is still on edge, wary of my touch. "It's okay, I want to help. What's your name?"

"Gage, ma'am," he manages, his voice thick with pain. "I'll just go home. Won't be no trouble."

He struggles to his feet, holding his arm at a funny angle, and tries to walk off.

I stand, following him.

"Where are you going?" I ask, worried. "I trained as a healer and am a nurse. I could help you."

He stiffens and shakes his head. "No, I can find my own way home."

I continue to walk next to him. "Where's home?" I ask, eyeing him. "What pack do you belong to?"

He stops and looks out over the parking lot, scanning for something. When he doesn't find it, his shoulders drop, and he looks down at the ground.

"Highland Pack," he mutters before taking off again.

Highland Pack. Our sworn rivals. Seeing him here like this puts me on edge, but the boy is clearly the victim in this scenario.

He's a child, and an injured one at that. I can't leave him to make his way home. Highland Pack boundaries are at least ten miles away. That's too far to walk.

"Hey, wait up," I call after him, digging my keys out of my bag. "I can drive you part of the way."

He shakes his head and moves faster, forcing me to jog after him. "Can't you at least tell me your family's name? Can I call someone for you?" I persist.

He doesn't answer, just darts across the parking lot.

I curse and give chase. My mother's instincts are screaming at me to protect this child and not let him disappear. I'm so focused on the boy that I don't notice the two shadows that cross my path until it's almost too late. I skid to a stop, narrowly avoiding crashing into two people, a man and a woman.

"Sorry," I say breathlessly. The hair on the back of my neck prickles.

I look up and find myself face-to-face with Sylvie and her friend from the Highland Pack. They block my path, sneering down at me.

"Well, if it isn't Little Miss Perfect," Sylvie sneers. "What are you doing with one of our pups?"

Her friend sizes me up and down disdainfully.

"Excuse me," I say, trying to step around them.

Sylvie blocks my path. "Don't think you're better than us just because Austin chose you," she hisses.

I hold back a frustrated growl. "I don't have time for this," I say through gritted teeth. "Now move."

Just then, I hear a yelp and see Gage collapsed on the ground, clutching his arm. Another wolf is standing over him, his leg poised to kick him. I look on in horror.

"Please," I plead. "That boy needs help. He's injured, and he's from your pack. I was only trying to help him."

For a second, Sylvie softens, glancing at Gage. Then her eyes harden again.

"He's Highland Pack. None of your concern. He'll heal. Clearly, we raise our boys tougher."

I stare at her in disbelief. "He's just a child!"

Her friend cracks her knuckles menacingly. "Time for you to scamper back to your pack, little Luna."

I feel my hackles rising in response to the clear threat, but I force myself to take a deep breath. Getting into a brawl here would only make things worse.

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I straighten up to my full height, meeting their glares evenly. "Gage was being attacked by a human boy. I was only trying to help. The way you're treating him is cruel. Just help him, or if you won't, allow me to!"

I look over at the boy again and am gratified that he takes a cautious step toward me.

"It's okay, you can come over here," I call out, encouraging him.

Sylvie scoffs. "We don't need your kind of help. We take care of our own."

Her other pack mate grabs the boy by the back of his shirt, tugging him back with a grunt.

I open my mouth to argue, but I hear movement and turn to see who is coming.

I freeze as Cleo's innocent voice reaches my ears. My throat becomes dry. Cleo.

"And then, do you know what I saw, Daddy?" Cleo says happily, "I saw three butterflies. One was gold, one was purple, and one was orange!"

Austin looks up, his gaze meeting mine, and I see the confusion in his eyes as he takes in the tense standoff. He straightens when he sees Sylvie and her friend, his posture taking on that of the Alpha.

Before I can say anything, warn them away, Sylvie whirls around and stalks toward them.

"Well, well, if it isn't my dear ex," she drawls, her voice dripping with disdain as she looks Austin up and down. Cleo stops mid-sentence, looking up at her with interest.

"Who are you, and why are you being rude to my Daddy?" she asks before looking over at me. "Hi, Mama!" she says, waving.

What are you doing here?" Austin asks tersely.

Sylvie's lip curls in a sneer. "He's not your Daddy, little mutt," she growls, crouching down to Cleo's level.

Cleo's small hand tightens around Austin's. He steps protectively in front of her, forcing Sylvie to back up.

"Leave. Now," he commands. The Alpha timbre rings clear in his voice. "And don't you ever talk about my daughter that way again."

Her friend cackles. "Daughter? I thought she was your little pet."

I feel my anger rising. How dare they speak that way about my child!

Austin growls, the sound reverberating through the parking lot. His eyes flash amber. Sylvie's bravado falters slightly.

Sylvie's eyes widen in surprise as she looks from Austin to Cleo and finally to me. I can see her mind working, trying to come up with something to say.

"The great Alpha, slumming it with a weak little Luna and breeding mongrel pups. No wonder your pack is going to the dogs," she hisses.

"Get out," he warns again, his voice low and dangerous. "We are on neutral land,

which is the only reason you're walking away from this right now, Sylvie. Take your people and get out or, mark my words, Nightwing Pack will make you leave."

Sylvie's friend flexes her fists, gears up for a fight. My heart pounds, the tension ratcheting up.

I move swiftly, blocking Sylvie's view of Cleo.

"That's enough," I say sharply. "You heard him. Go. Now."

Sylvie snarls, her eyes flashing amber for a brief moment before she reins in her wolf.

She turns on her heel and stalks away, her friend following with a scowl.

"Get up, you worthless thing," she spits, grabbing Gage on their way across the parking lot. The small boys' whimpers echo behind them.

I let out a breath I didn't realize I was holding.

Austin squeezes my shoulder. "Are you okay?"

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I embrace him, pulling Cleo into me as well.

“What happened?” Austin asks.

“That boy is hurt,” Cleo says, staring off toward the place where Gage had laid. “He got hurt in a fight, but he gets hurt at home too.”

I look over at the empty pavement and then back at her. “What do you mean?” I ask her carefully.

“I saw them. They hurt him at his house too. His grown-ups. ”

I turn to Austin, worry in my eyes. “He’s so young,” I whisper, “And I found him being beat on by a human.”

Austin’s eyes darken and the muscle in his jaw tics.

“He’s from Highland Pack. There’s nothing I can do,” he says, finally.

I nod, a single tear falling down my cheek as I look out to where Sylvie had disappeared with him. The idea of adults willingly hurting children makes me sick to my stomach.

“I hope he gets out,” I whisper.

“Let’s go,” Austin says gruffly, reaching for my hand. “If Highland felt comfortable enough to come into town while we’re here to sell their wares, they’re plotting

something. I need you and Cleo safe at home.”

I let him lead me back toward the sorting station, stopping only to have him carry the box of supplies to Sonia and Tiffany.

The entire drive home, all I can think about is Gage and the way his little face was marked by pain.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Yelena

“You make the absolute best blueberry muffins. I don’t know how you do it. I’ve tried that recipe you gave me a dozen times, but they never turn out the right way. What’s your secret?” Luna Elizabeth teases, rinsing the old yellow mixing bowl.

My kitchen smells divine. For the last two hours, Elizabeth and I have been baking up a storm. We’ve made cookies, muffins, and even a pan of brownies.

I pinch off a piece of my muffin and stuff it in my mouth, savoring the sweet taste. “I don’t have any secrets, it’s just the recipe,” I laugh. My coffee cup is empty, so I get up from the table to refill it.

“Well, whatever you do, it’s delicious,” Elizabeth says fondly. “The boys will be so excited when they come in from the workshop.”

I smile and reach over to grab her coffee cup as well, refilling it at the same time. She accepts the hot mug with a quiet thank you and I join her at the table. This time with Elizabeth is so affirming. Having her as my mother-in-law is more than I could ever ask for. She makes me feel welcome and accepted, not only as Austin’s mate, but as their daughter by marriage. Having the opportunity to have a mother figure in my life

like this, sharing simple moments like cooking and visiting, warms my heart.

Austin has also seen an improvement in his relationship with his parents, and it gives me joy to watch him flourish like this. He and his father have been hard at work making a dollhouse for Cleo in the old workshop. Every weekend they are out there, carving small animal figurines and building the rooms.

It's beautiful to watch them like this.

"Where is my little princess this morning?" Elizabeth asks, blowing on the hot liquid.

I hesitate for a second before remembering that Elizabeth and Malakai know all about Cleo's Seer abilities.

"She's training. We had a coven trainer come in. Her name is Aurelia. She's supposed to be the best of the best. I want Cleo to have a full understanding of her capabilities and control over her powers. Before it's too late."

Elizabeth nods thoughtfully.

"A wise choice, to be sure. Callie used to refer to her abilities as her greatest blessing and the most wicked curse."

My heart clenches again at the memory of Callie. How I wish that she could have been here for this, to help guide both me and my daughter.

I manage a watery smile. "Callie was so very wise," I murmur.

Elizabeth lays a comforting hand on my shoulder. "She loved you, you know that," she tells me, giving me a soft smile.

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I nod and snuffle, taking a huge gulp of my coffee and burning my tongue.

I wince as the scalding liquid makes its way down my throat. Elizabeth gives me a sympathetic look as I set my mug down.

"I'm sure Cleo is in excellent hands with Aurelia," she says gently. "Cleo has a strength in her that reminds me so much of Callie. She will come into her own, in time."

I nod, hoping Elizabeth is right. My nerves over Cleo and her emerging abilities have been wearing on me.

A low, mournful howl suddenly echoes through the woods outside. Elizabeth and I exchange a glance.

"The boundary alarm," she murmurs. "There must be trespassers nearby."

I frown, standing up from the table. More howls sound, signaling our wolves to be on alert.

I know I'm supposed to stay inside, but I can't, not when the two people I love most are out there. My wolf urges me forward. I can't shake the feeling that I need to see Cleo. Immediately.

"I'm going to run out and check on Austin really fast," I tell Elizabeth, already heading toward the door.

“They will come here when it’s safe,” she says, looking uneasy. “It’s probably a false alarm.”

I ignore her and step outside, making my way to the workshop along the side of the house.

The crisp autumn air hits my face as I jog down the leaf-strewn trail toward the workshop where Austin and Malakai are working. I need everything to be okay.

The howls are growing more urgent, putting me and my wolf on edge.

What if it's not a trespasser, but something worse? What about Cleo in the woods?

I walk faster, my breath coming out in little white puffs in the chilly air.

Moon Goddess, hear my plea. Protect my family, I pray.

The familiar sight of the workshop takes shape. Austin and Malakai are standing outside, both looking to the woods and talking quietly amongst themselves.

That feeling of unease creeps up my spine again.

Something is very wrong.

They both whirl around when I approach, Austin’s face immediately pinched with worry.

“Baby, why are you out here?” he asks, hurrying to my side. “The alarm has sounded. You need to be inside.”

Another howl rends the air, putting all of us on edge. It’s the signal for an attack.

“They’re assembling the guard to depend for a potential attack,” he says grimly. “I have to go.”

"Let me come with you this time," I beg, anxiety rising.

But he's already shaking his head. "I can't put you in danger, Yelena. Stay here."

“Father? Watch over her,” he asks.

“You have my word, son,” Malakai says solemnly.

Austin drops a swift kiss on my head and shifts in a flash, leaving me standing helpless in the yard of the workshop.

I watch helplessly as Austin bounds away, his massive black wolf already blending in with the shadows from the trees.

My heart hammers in my chest. I can’t just stand here while my mate and daughter are in danger. I can’t.

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I start to follow Austin when a firm hand pulls me back.

“Let the guard handle this, Yelena,” Malakai rumbles. “You’ll only put yourself at risk.”

I try to wrench my arm away. “Malakai, please! Cleo is out there! Your granddaughter. We have to go get her.”

Malakai’s emerald eyes soften slightly, but his grip remains iron-tight around my arm.

“Your Alpha told you to stay put, Luna,” he says firmly.

I exhale sharply. “He did. But he also knows that I will do whatever it takes to protect my family,” I argue, slumping in frustration. “Can’t you understand that?”

His eyes flash and his grip on my arm loosens.

“I watched my son disappear into himself when he lost you the first time. I can’t watch that again,” he says softly. “You are his world.”

“Half of his world,” I correct him, looking out at the woods. “The other half is still out there. In danger.”

The urge to run headlong into the woods and not stop until I find Cleo is overwhelming. I need to have her in my arms. My wolf is anxious, and so am I.

Malakai curses and then, to my surprise, turns to me and grabs my shoulders.

“You will follow me every step of the way, do you understand?” he says fiercely. The echo of his days as my Alpha are evident in his words and his tone.

I nod vigorously. “Of course. All I want is to get Cleo and Aurelia to safety, and then I will be home and not leave until it’s safe.”

“Give me your word, Yelena,” Malakai orders. “Your word that you will stay where I can protect you.”

My stomach is in knots, but I nod my head. “You have my word.”

A piercing, agonized howl cuts through the air, making my blood run cold. Malakai and I exchange an alarmed look before he shifts into a massive gray wolf and takes off toward the sound.

I stand frozen for a moment before I shift into my own tawny wolf and take off after him

The howls continue to rend the air, sounding the alarm. I can't shake the ominous feeling settling over me. Soon, we are dashing through the woods. The branches whip my arms and face as I run.

I rely on my senses, urging my wolf to find Cleo and Aurelia. Before it's too late.

The heavy, metallic scent of blood fills the air, and we both skid to a stop, sniffing. Slowly, Malakai picks his way through the underbrush, leading us toward a small outcropping of rocks. I follow until I hear a soft whimper.

Frantically, I look around for Cleo or some sign of life, but I see no one. I creep

forward another ten feet, and the smell intensifies.

When I round the corner, behind an old rotting log, I almost fall over.

Aurelia lies motionless on the ground, covered in deep gashes. Her long pale hair is matted with dark blood. I shift back immediately and fall to the ground.

“Malakai!” I call out, reaching for her wrist to feel for her pulse. She’s alive. Barely.

Her wounds are extensive, and I know she will need the healers immediately in order to live. Malakai comes crashing through the trees, shifting back to kneel beside me.

“Watch her,” I order, “I need to find Cleo.”

Malakai gently places his hands on Aurelia’s wounds, trying to stem the flow of blood. She moans softly, her eyelids fluttering.

“Cleo!” I call out, searching the surrounding trees. “Sweetheart, can you hear me? You can come out. It’s safe.”

But the only answer is the distant howl of the wolves and the whistle of the wind in the trees. My panic starts low in my gut and travels up my chest.

“Cleo!” I call out, wringing my hands.

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Aurelia gasps, and I whirl around to see her struggling to sit up.

“Hold on, Aurelia,” I murmur, “We’re going to get you help.”

“What happened?” Malakai asks, his green eyes flashing with worry.

Aurelia's breath comes in ragged gasps as she struggles to speak. "Attacked...took her..."

Rage and fear rip through me.

Cleo. Someone has taken my Cleo.

I bare my teeth, a snarl building in my throat. I will tear apart whoever did this. They will wish they were never born.

I shift to my wolf and sit, tilting my head back to howl my anger and rage, pouring out my pain into my howl.

When I’ve stopped, Malakai places a hand on my back. I growl, and he looks at me sternly.

“We will get her back. Austin will get her back,” he says firmly. “But Aurelia will die if we don’t get her back to the healers.”

I know he speaks the truth. But the idea of leaving where my daughter was last seen feels physically impossible.

My daughter is out there, taken by people who would harm her. My heart screams to keep searching and find her.

“Yelena. We must go. If they return to find you...” Malakai’s voice trails off. He doesn’t need to say it.

If the rival pack stole my daughter and me, they would be in the position to get Austin to give up whatever they wanted.

I huff and take off back toward home. I need to find Austin. Austin will get her back.

Be strong, Cleo, I think as I tear through the bushes and trees. We’re going to find you.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Austin

“I tracked them throughout the woods, Alpha. There were many separate scents. I suspect they have been planning this for a while. Multiple intruders. I was unable to get eyes on your child, but her scent was all over the trail. As was the blood of her trainer.”

I curse and rake my hand through my hair. My chest is pounding with anger and worry. My daughter. They not only came onto our land unprovoked, but they stole one of our children.

My child. How am I going to tell Yelena that our daughter was taken?

“If they harm a single hair on her head, I will take them all down,” I vow, looking out over the small creek that separates our lands.

Vincent grunts in agreement.

There can be no coming back from this. It is a crime that must be answered. I plant my feet into the soft earth and will myself to remain calm. Cleo is over there. My Cleo.

Be brave, sweet girl. Daddy is coming to get you.

I stand on the edge of the Highland border, my blood boiling under my skin. This has gone beyond rivalry. To come onto our land, terrorize our pack like this?

How dare they come here! Launch a war like this? It's unbelievably risky. We are surrounded by humans. We don't have the luxury of fighting it out like the old ways. If we were to be discovered...

Vincent stands next to me, his chest still heaving from his run.

A long, agonized howl echoes through the woods and Vincent and I exchange a glance.

The pain in that howl can only mean one thing: Yelena knows.

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I dread facing my mate and telling her that I have failed her and our daughter. As Alpha, my job is to keep my pack safe. And today, I failed. Under my leadership, Highland Pack members were able to sneak in and steal my own daughter from the woods. They were able to come onto our land and take her.

Shame, anger, and a myriad of other emotions swirl inside me until I feel like I might vomit. I want to lash out, but I have to stay focused.

Moon Goddess, watch over her until I can get to her, I pray fiercely.

The fact that the Highland Pack was so bold as to take Cleo from our lands is disturbing. I can't imagine what Alpha Paxton can be thinking to risk his men and his pack like this unless....

My mind drifts back to the interactions we've had with Sylvie over the last few days. Our pack knows better than to speak a word of Cleo's gifts outside our borders, but could Sylvie have heard it somehow? Did they kidnap her to use her gifts, or is this still all about revenge against me?

Either way, we have to get her back.

"We need a plan," I snarl, turning to Vincent. "Post guards along the border. If a bird so much as farts out here, I want to know about it. Then meet me back at the house. We're getting her back."

"Yes, Alpha," Vincent says immediately. He turns to follow my orders but stops, looking back at me with kind eyes. "We're going to get her back, Austin. The whole

pack will fight to get her back, if that's what it takes. She's ours, too."

Emotion clouds my eyes for a moment, and I clear my throat, clapping him on the back.

"Thank you, my friend," I whisper hoarsely.

My mind races with possibilities as we head back toward the pack houses. We need a plan. Not getting Cleo back is not an option, but we likely only have one shot at this. If we botch it, Cleo could become collateral damage, and I refuse to let that happen.

My feet are heavy when I approach our house. People are bustling in and out, including the healers.

"Aurelia barely survived. Can you believe what would have happened if the Luna hadn't found her? She's so lucky!"

My hackles rise as I overhear the two healers in conversation. Rushing forward, I interrupt them, suddenly terrified that something has happened to Yelena as well.

"Where is my mate?" I growl, grabbing a young healer by the shirt.

"A-alpha," he stutters, looking wide-eyed. "The Luna has locked herself inside her bedroom." He looks at me nervously.

"What is it," I bark.

"It's just...she kind of lost it," He whispers, looking from side to side, "One minute, she was composed and giving us orders, telling us we needed to do everything we could for Aurelia, but then she just kind of got a far-off look in her eye and started...."

“What? She started what?” I growl, stepping forward.

“She started talking to herself, Alpha. And then she ran off to her quarters and locked herself in.”

Shit.

Pushing past him, I run through the house, ignoring all others until I get to our bedroom door. I can hear movement inside and I rest my forehead against the wood, letting myself calm down.

“Yelena?” I call out, hoping she can hear me through the door. The movement shifts, and I hear rapid footsteps approaching. I have barely enough time to step back before she wrenches open the door.

Her eyes are wild, and her hair is disheveled.

"Austin," she cries. "They took her, they took our little girl!"

She collapses against my chest, and I wrap my arms around her shaking frame. "I know, love. I know." I stroke her hair, even as my own heart threatens to shatter.

We stand like that for a long moment, taking comfort in each other's embrace. When Yelena's sobs finally subside, she steps back, wiping her tear-stained cheeks.

“I swear, I heard her,” she whispers softly. “I could hear her in my mind, telling me she’s okay, but that she wants to come home. I wasn’t sure at first, I came running in here where it was quieter so I could hear her. But Austin, I swear I did. I heard her. Clearly. That can’t be possible, right?”

I shake my head. “I don’t know. There have been stories about Seer abilities that are

hard to believe. What did you hear?"

Yelena gulps in air, turning away from me as she fidgets with her hands. I can feel her panic rising.

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“She said she was in a dark place, and it smelled like earth and rotting food. She can’t see a way out, but she’s trying.”

I swallow hard and try to make sense of it. Yelena’s anxiety is throbbing through our bond. “Well, she’s brave,” I tell her, reaching out to comfort my mate. “She’s a smart kid. She knows to give us the information we need to find her.”

I try to smile, but it feels forced. This is outside my comfort zone.

“So, that was her? I heard her? She can communicate through our minds? What if they find out who she is, Austin? What if they find out what she is! Oh, my Goddess, they could keep her forever. We might never see her again.”

The panic is written across her face, and she’s trembling. I do the only thing I can think to do. I pull her into my embrace and kiss her.

She’s stiff at first, her lips pursed under mine, but as I hold her close, she softens, and leans into my embrace.

Her lips move over mine tentatively at first, before a whimper escapes her, and she throws her arms around my neck, kissing me back with gusto.

I deepen the kiss, taking this stolen moment of comfort and giving in, if only for a moment, to the heat between us.

We cling to each other, craving the comfort of our intimacy. By the time we pull away, Yelena has stopped trembling. Her lips are slightly swollen, and her cheeks are

flushed, but her eyes are clear.

She's calm. Ready.

"What's the plan?" Her voice is hoarse but steady.

"I've sent Vincent to organize border patrols. Once we get more information, a small squad will be dispatched to meet with the Alpha of the Highland Pack. We'll get her back, Yelena. I promise."

She nods sharply. "I'll gather the others. We'll be ready."

I exhale slowly and grip her shoulders. "I need you to stay here."

Yelena looks up at me, her expression fierce despite the tears. "We will bring her home. I'm going with you. I won't argue with you about this. It's happening."

I hesitate.

She's a fighter, my mate. And there's no way she'll sit idly by while our child is missing. But a part of me wants to insist it's too dangerous. To tell her to stay home.

But, as I gaze into Yelena's determined eyes, I know there's no point in continuing to argue. As much as I want to protect her, I understand her need to be there when we rescue our daughter.

"All right," I relent with a sigh. "But you stay by my side at all times. And if I tell you to run, you run. No questions asked."

She gives a curt nod, her eyes flashing yellow with the promise of vengeance. "We'll make them pay for this."

With Yelena by my side, it takes us a little over an hour to gather the right team and our supplies. Vincent has assembled a dozen of our best fighters, all ready and willing to lay down their lives for us, and for Cleo.

I stand before them on our meeting rock, humbled by their loyalty.

“Today, the Highland Pack has broken our Sacred Code and put us all in danger. They brought an unprovoked attack to our lands, they spilled blood in our woods, and they kidnapped one of our pups.”

My throat tightens as the words really sink in. “My daughter, Cleo, is being held prisoner. She is only a child, not yet old enough to go to school. And she is the next Seer. Her gifts from the Moon Goddess have been confirmed. Taking her was not only an attack against me and my mate, but against our pack as a whole. We will not tolerate it.”

The assembled warriors stomp their feet and howl in agreement.

“They will not get away with it!” Vincent roars, stepping up to lead his squadron. “Will they, men?”

“We will get her back, Alpha! We’ll bring her home, Luna!” the men shout, eager to get going.

With a howl, I jump off the rock and shift. Yelena follows me, keeping close. The plan is simple. Under the cover of darkness, we will traverse our woods to the boundary line. Alpha Paxton will be expecting us to try to sneak in, but we have a surprise for him. My men will blanket the woods, lying in wait, while Vincent, Yelena, my father, and I will walk right up to his front gate and demand Cleo’s return.

As Yelena and I run through the woods, I can feel her anxiety and anger simmering beneath the surface.

We're nearly at the border when a piercing howl splits the night air.

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I stop, my heart pounding in my chest. It's the alarm.

They know we're here.

Quickly, I shift back and grab my clothing from the small bag my father has carried. We all dress and hurry toward the winding road that leads to the Highland Pack village.

Three guards meet us at the gate.

"You're in the wrong place, Nightwing," one snarls, his eyes flashing yellow.

"I'm here for Alpha Paxton. Get him. Now," I respond, standing tall. The Alpha authority in my voice makes the smaller man flinch.

"I'm here, Fletcher. Stand down."

I peer around the guard and see Alpha Paxton strolling up to the gate with Sylvie on his arm.

"Alpha Austin, what brings you to our gate this time of night?" he asks with a sneer.

Sylvie is staring at us with a malicious grin, and it makes my hackles rise.

"Your men attacked us and stole one of our young. We want her back."

Sylvie scoffs, and Fletcher laughs as he turns to his compatriot and elbows him in the

ribs.

“There’s no proof of that,” Alpha Paxton says smoothly.

“Perhaps your daughter ran away because she was so embarrassed to have been sired by such a weak Alpha,” Sylvie says snidely.

Yelena steps forward, her rage evident in her eyes. “We never said it was our daughter who was taken.”

Everyone freezes.

Alpha Paxton removes Sylvie’s hand from his arm and shoves her away from him.

“You stupid bitch,” he snarls. “You don’t talk unless I give you permission.”

He raises his hand to her, but she ducks out of the way and runs off into the darkness.

“I know you have her. I will get her back, Paxton. One way or another,” I tell him, my voice low and threatening.

Fletcher and the other two guards growl a warning, but Paxton just smiles and steps forward.

“You’re too much of a rule follower to break the Code. So, no, I’m not that worried,” he says, silkily. “If you want her back, presuming I do have her, you could start by offering me the territory you promised me when you accepted the marriage contract. If you don’t, we’ll just keep the little Seer as payment. With her that young, she’s the perfect age to train into a useful tool for our pack.”

Yelena snarls, and Vincent steps forward, ready to jump into action, but I wave them

off and instead beckon Paxton to come closer.

He saunters to the gate.

“Shouldn’t you be taking off by now?” he asks.

I hold myself back until he’s within reach. As soon as that smug face is close enough, I cock my fist back and let fly with a right hook, straight into his face.

“Nothing will stop me from getting my daughter back, you bastard!” I shout. “Not you, not your men, and certainly not the Code.”

As Paxton’s men rush toward us, I can feel the adrenaline coursing through my body. Vincent and I quickly take down the first few attackers, our years of training coming into use.

But then, more men start pouring out of the woods and I realize we are outnumbered.

Vincent gives a sharp whistle, and our own men start appearing from the shadows, ready for battle. I search for Yelena, worried that she will get caught in the crossfire. It distracts me, forcing me to dodge a punch from one of the Highland Pack men.

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As I duck, I catch a glimpse of Yelena just as she takes down one of Paxton's guards with a swift kick to the stomach and realize I needn't have worried. My mate is strong. She has fire in her eyes, and it only makes me love her more. With the knowledge that my Luna can hold her own, I give in to my instincts fully and direct my focus to the fight ahead.

Soon she disappears into the darkness again. I have to remind myself that she is strong enough to manage her own fight as I dodge a knife-wielding Highland wolf, forcing him to his knees. Still, every time I get a chance, I scan the road for her.

She's nowhere to be seen. I test the bond between us, sighing in relief when I find it thrumming and strong.

She's not hurt or dying, at least I know that much.

I crash my fist into the face of the attacking wolf, returning each hit I've taken with twice the force.

It's only when I remember what my father had promised me that I am able to return my focus to the fray.

Right before I addressed the men, he had pulled me aside. "I will not leave her. She will be protected. You are Alpha now, and you must stand strong," he said.

Knowing my father has her under his protection is a relief. He's the only one I can truly say I trust with my mate's life. I know he can protect her.

He has to.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Yelena

My bond with Austin is flowing with power and adrenaline. He is fighting fiercely for our daughter and our pack. It fills my heart with pride. He's a strong Alpha, and I know he will win this fight. After several minutes of fighting my way through the fray, I see my chance to slip away and run toward it. The darkness of the woods on the Highland side of the border welcomes me.

Malakai trails closely behind me. My hope is that the rest of the men will be distracted by the fight at the gate and give us enough time to find Cleo.

I won't leave here without her.

She is part of me, a part of my very soul, and I can't lose her.

"Quick, duck into those shadows and shift," Malakai orders, gesturing toward a dense cropping of trees. "I suspect they are keeping her in the village, or possibly just outside. Trust in the Moon Goddess to lead us."

I nod and move swiftly, doing as he said. It's a relief to be in my wolf form while out in this strange environment.

I feel safer this way, more alert.

I look up at the moon shining high above us, praying that the Goddess herself is watching over all of us, but especially Cleo.

Malakai and I run through the Highland woods, our noses to the ground as we make our way in the general direction of the village. The woods are quiet, almost too quiet. There's not even a hoot of an owl or the chirp of a cricket here.

It's odd.

If I strain my ears, I can still hear the fight, but otherwise, the air feels heavy here. I don't like it.

Finally, the first structures come into view.

Unlike our modern houses and cottages, the Highland Pack appear to be living in ramshackle huts, decrepit old cabins, and broken-down trailers.

I pause to sniff the air, sorting through the myriad of unfamiliar scents to find any trace of Cleo.

Malakai does the same beside me, his hackles raised in anticipation.

Suddenly, I catch it—the faintest whiff of Cleo's sweet honeysuckle scent. It's coming from around here. Somewhere.

I exchange a glance with Malakai, and we creep toward it, senses on high alert.

A rustling in the woods beside us makes us whirl around just in time to see two large wolves leap out at us. Malakai jumps in front of me, his teeth bared. Without waiting for the attack, he leaps out at them on the offense, his sharp teeth closing around the leg of one of the Highland wolves.

The wolf yelps and staggers back, blood dripping from the wound.

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Together, the two Highland wolves advance on us. I growl as well, widening my stance. Malakai moves fast, his years of experience and training kicking in as he takes them on, two at once.

I watch, too caught up in the fight to move. After he pins one of the wolves down, forcing him to submit, Malakai catches my eye and nods toward the village.

His intent is clear. Go see if Cleo is there.

I turn and run toward it, shifting only when I step onto the main village road.

Everything looks abandoned. It's eerie. Every few feet, I sniff, trying to pinpoint where Cleo could be. My heart aches to hold her again, to see with my own two eyes that she's safe and well.

I pass a broken-down car, already rusted over. The scent of wolves is stronger here, and I'm on high alert. Just as I pass the car, a little head pops up, and I startle. A flash of red and then a scrawny, familiar-looking boy is crawling out onto the road. He has a long scrape on his arm, and his clothes are filthy.

"Gage?" I ask uncertainly.

He looks at me and nods shortly.

"They have your girl, the pretty one who likes butterflies," he says gruffly.

My pulse starts to pound.

“Do you know where she is? Is she okay?” I rush out, worry coloring my tone.

Gage looks around cautiously. Seeing no one, he takes another step forward.

“She’s in the cabin. But...” He shifts his gaze to the buildings and then toes his foot in the dirt. I look down and see that his shoes have holes in them.

This poor kid.

“Gage, I have to find her. Please, tell me where she is. I’m begging you.”

“It’s over there,” he says, pointing up the hill. His face is pinched with fear, but he takes a deep breath and throws his shoulders back with courage and determination. “Here, I’ll walk with you.”

“Thank you,” I breathe, hurrying in the direction he pointed.

I’m so close. I can feel it.

We don’t see anyone on our way up to the cabin. I climb up the hill, panting once I get to the top. The cabin looks abandoned, with boarded-up windows and peeling paint. But Cleo’s scent is strong here.

Hope blooms in my chest.

I try the door handle, but it’s locked. There’s an old piece of firewood lying on the porch. I pick it up and hurl it at the window with all my might. It takes three tries to fully break the window on the front door, but I manage it. Carefully, I reach through the empty pane and turn the lock on the door, stepping inside.

The cabin is dark and smells of rotting food and waste.

“Cleo?” I call out softly.

A scuffling noise comes from the corner, and I hurry toward it.

“Mama! You came!”

My heart leaps as I rush over to find Cleo, dirty and disheveled but alive. She’s huddled on a pile of dirty blankets. I gather her in my arms, relief washing over me.

My girl is safe. For one beautiful moment, my world feels right again.

A loud slap cracks through the air, followed by a whimper of pain. I whirl around, shoving Cleo behind me.

Sylvie is standing in the doorway, her face streaked with dirt. She has Gage cowering in the doorway.

“You are everywhere,” she snarls, “Like a goddamn cockroach. I think it’s time someone exterminated you like the vermin you are.”

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“Mama!” Cleo cries out, her hands clutching my leg.

I rise slowly, careful to keep Cleo behind me.

“Only the weak and cowardly prey on children. Let the boy go and get out. This ends now,” I say firmly.

She shakes Gage’s arm and then drops him, making him whimper again.

“Go, run!” I urge him as he scrambles away from Sylvie. He doesn’t leave the room, however. He just hovers along the edge.

“Go,” I yell again, but he shakes his head.

She stalks toward him, her hand raised, but I step forward.

“Your fight is with me, not the boy.” My voice is low and furious. “Gage, get behind me.”

Sylvie looks at me with fury, her claws extending from her fingertips.

“I’m going to enjoy destroying you,” she spits, swinging for my face.

I duck under Sylvie's claws, feeling them barely graze the top of my head. Cleo whimpers again behind me. I have to end this quickly before she gets hurt.

"Stay down, baby," I murmur to Cleo before launching myself at Sylvie.

“Here, I’ll protect you,” I hear Gage say right before Sylvie and I crash together, all teeth and claws.

I rake my nails down her arm, drawing blood. She screams in fury and backhands me across the face. I taste blood but keep fighting.

We wrestle across the filthy floor of the cabin, kicking up dust and dirt. Sylvie is strong and fueled by rage, but I'm faster. I manage to get on top of her and pin her down. She thrashes underneath me.

"It's over," I growl in her face. "You've lost."

Her lip curls in a snarl. "Never."

With a burst of strength, she flips us and now has me pinned down. Her claws dig into my shoulders, and I cry out. Cleo is screaming.

Moon Goddess, give me strength. As the Luna. As Cleo’s mom. As Austin’s mate.

A tingle starts in my fingertips and extends up my arms, racing through my veins. I push up against Sylvie, shoving my way out of her hold with a grunt. With a cry, I burst forward into my shift, exploding out against her.

Sylvie screams and jumps back, giving me enough room to leap out of her grasp as I circle her, my wolf hackles raised and teeth bared. She shifts as well and darts toward me, her teeth snapping at my legs.

“Mama! Watch out!”

I duck and lunge to the right, narrowly missing Sylvie’s sneaky lunge toward my haunch.

Gage lets out a shrill howl, drawing Sylvie's attention. It's the distraction I needed. As she lunges toward the boy, I crash into her, my teeth sinking into the soft fur of her neck until I taste blood.

We fall to the floor, and Sylvie whimpers. I shift back and stand, spitting her foul-tasting blood on the ground before aiming a kick at her side. My teeth marks are still on her neck, and there's a steady trickle of blood.

I did some damage but, as I assess her critically, I know that she'll live.

I loom over her, stepping on her wrist so she is forced to stay down.

"I said, this is over." I'm breathing hard as I look down at Sylvie.

She stares back at me with wide, frightened eyes. Her body is rigid.

"Fine," she whispers, showing me her neck in submission.

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I lift my foot and back up, glancing over my shoulder to check on Cleo. Her little face is streaked with tears, but she is unharmed.

The warm feeling of relief crashes over me.

Sylvie struggles to her feet, swaying unsteadily. There's a real fear in her eyes now as she looks at me.

I straighten up.

"You will never threaten my pack or my family again." My voice rings with authority. For the first time, I really understand the power of the position of I'm in. I can't command a room like the Alpha can, but as the Luna, I have my own strength.

"Leave," I order, dismissing her.

She takes another step back. For a moment, it seems she might keep fighting, her pride clearly warring with her fear. But finally, she lowers her head again and then turns, running out the door.

I let out a breath. It's over. At least this part is.

All around us, a mournful howl sings through the trees, causing Cleo, Gage, and I to huddle together. My ears prick as I try to make sense of it. But soon, another more familiar howl joins them. One of power and victory.

Austin.

A massive gray wolf bursts through the bushes, causing Cleo to cling to me in alarm. I just release a sigh of relief.

Malakai shifts back to his human form and greets us both with a smile.

“Little princess! It’s so good to see you again,” he says, giving Cleo a warm smile.

She smiles back, and I walk over to give Malakai a half hug.

“We’re done here. Let’s go find your Daddy, kiddo,” he continues. “And go home.”

“Daddy is waiting for us,” Cleo says happily.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Austin

Cleo's breaths are steady and quiet, occasionally punctuated by a gentle snore as she peacefully slumbers. She looks so peaceful like this, sleeping in her pink bed, all wrapped up in her blanket covered in butterflies.

Yelena slips her hand into mine, squeezing it. I turn to her, my heart in my throat.

“I want to put a tracking device on her so we never lose her again!” I whisper, only half-joking. Yelena laughs softly and wraps her arms around my waist.

“We won’t be able to keep her locked up forever, but for now? I’m grateful we can keep her safe,” she whispers.

We stand in the doorway together, watching Cleo sleep for a few more minutes. When Yelena yawns, I drop a kiss on her forehead and pull her out of the room,

shutting the door behind me carefully.

“Come on, sleepyhead, we have one more to check on, and then it’s time for bed.”

She grins sleepily up at me, and we make our way to the adjoining room. I crack the door open and peek in.

A lump in the middle of the bed is all that is visible, at first, but then I spy the tell-tale tuft of red hair that peeks out of the very top.

Gage.

I watch as he tosses and turns in his sleep. I can only imagine the nightmares he must be having, reliving the horror of what happened at his old pack.

Anger roils in my gut when I remember how terrified he was when he saw me, covered in the blood of his packmates. Yet...he had enough courage to defy his pack to lead Yelena to Cleo. He stayed to protect them both, and then he followed her. His courage is commendable.

I couldn’t say no to his request to live among our pack. The bastards at Highland Pack may have treated him like dirt, but not here. That’s not how we do things.

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He helped save my daughter, so he's part of the family now.

What galls me the most is that they haven't even asked about him. The Council has ordered Highland Pack banished for what they did. Alpha Paxton knows we have Gage here.

Yet...they have never asked for him back. They just left him. Never even said goodbye.

A pack abandoning their own young. So shameful.

I gently close the door to Gage's room, not wanting to disturb his restless sleep. Gage has a lot of pain to work through, but he'll never be abandoned again. Not if I have anything to say about it.

Yelena leans into me as we walk down the stairs, the events of the last few days weighing heavily on us both.

We reach the kitchen, and I grab the bottle of red wine and pour us both a glass. Yelena takes a long sip and closes her eyes, leaning against the counter.

"I can't stop reliving it in my head," she whispers, setting her drink down and wrapping her arms around herself.

"I was so terrified," she says, finally.

I take a long drink of wine and set my own glass down, walking over to hold her.

She leans into my comfort, allowing me to care for her in the way she has so often cared for me.

I pull back and meet her eyes. “Me too. I don’t want a life that doesn’t have you and Cleo, and hell, even Gage in it. You’re it for me. My world.”

“I will never let anything happen to you, or the children, again,” I vow.

She nods, sniffing into my shirt before pulling back and tipping her face toward mine.

I lean down and capture her lips in a kiss. She melts into me, her hands gripping my shirt tightly, as if she’s afraid I’ll disappear.

I deepen the kiss, licking at her lips until she opens for me. We’ve been through so much together, and I never want to let her go.

She’s my rock. My everything. My mate.

When we break apart for air, I rest my forehead against hers and smile.

“I love you,” I whisper.

She smiles up at me with a watery smile.

“I love you, too. So much.”

Our comfortable silence is suddenly destroyed by an ear-splitting scream that rends through the air. We leap apart instantly. My instincts tell me to shift, to protect my home, but before I can do anything, Yelena is already running for the stairs.

“The kids!” she gasps, taking the stairs two at a time.

There’s a soft light coming from Gage’s room, so we hurry down the hall and burst through the door.

“Mama! Daddy! Shh!” A little voice says, reproachfully.

I skid to a stop and look at Cleo. She’s standing next to Gage’s bed wearing her pink and purple bathrobe and unicorn slippers. Her hand is outstretched and lying across Gage’s chest.

His face is tear-stained, and he’s breathing heavily, but he seems like he’s calming down.

“What happened?” Yelena asks, hurrying over to them.

“Gage had a dream about the bad people. But don’t worry. I told him he’s safe here. The bad people won’t come here anymore. I know it.”

I glance over at Yelena and then back at Gage and Cleo.

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“Gage, buddy, how are you doing?” I ask softly. “Do you need anything?”

He shakes his head no, and Cleo smiles softly at him. “You’re going to be okay, you know,” she whispers, going up on her tiptoes to press a sweet kiss to his cheek.

“I feel like the luckiest Dad in the world, having the two of you in my life,” I tell them, causing Gage to start.

“You are the luckiest Daddy in the world,” Cleo says cheekily before turning her attention back to Gage.

I watch as she smiles down at him happily.

“I think you should be my brother, don’t you?” she asks, patting his hand.

Gage turns crimson and looks at us as if he can’t believe his ears. “Brother? What?”

Yelena beams at him and nods.

“You want to keep me?” he stutters, tears welling in his eyes, “Forever?”

I reach for Yelena’s hand, and we walk over to stand next to Cleo.

“Forever, Gage. If you want us.”

A strangled sob escapes his throat, and he looks away, brushing away tears with the back of his hand.

“You’d be my mom and dad?” he asks again. There’s a spark of hope in his eyes that makes my heart want to burst. “But you’re the Alpha and the Luna!”

“We want you to be part of our family, Gage. If you want to be,” Yelena says gently.

Gage's eyes light up with excitement, but at the same time, fear and doubt flicker across his face. He looks from Yelena to me, as if searching for any sign that this is all too good to be true.

"Really?" he whispers, his voice barely audible.

"Yes, really," I confirm.

His face breaks out in a wide grin, and he nods.

"Thank you," he says softly. "I've always wanted a family."

Yelena wipes away his tears gently before tucking a strand of hair behind his ear. "You have one now," she says firmly. “Forever.”

"And you'll always be part of our pack," I add, placing my hand on his shoulder.

Gage's smile widens even more as he nods eagerly.

“And I get to be your sister!” Cleo sings out, patting his hand happily.

Gage looks over at Cleo, his eyes shining. "I've never had a sister before," he says.

Cleo grins. "Well, now you have the bestest sister ever!"

Gage chuckles softly. "I believe it."

I look over at Yelena and share a smile. My heart feels full to bursting seeing our children connecting.

"All right you two, it's late. Let's tuck you both back into bed," I say.

Cleo pouts. "But I wanna stay with Gage!"

"You can see him in the morning, little moon," Yelena says gently. "For now, bedtime."

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Cleo sighs dramatically but allows Yelena to lead her from the room. I sit on the edge of Gage's bed.

"How are you feeling?" I ask.

He ducks his head. "Better. Thank you. For everything. For wanting me."

I squeeze his shoulder. "There's no place we'd rather you be than right here with us."

Gage blinks back tears and nods.

"Try to get some more rest," I say. "Tomorrow is a new day."

I get up and walk to Cleo's room, where Yelena is tucking our little princess back into her bed. I lean down to kiss her forehead.

"Good night, sweet girl."

She yawns, already drifting off. "Love you, Daddy."

"Love you more," I whisper, turning out the light.

Yelena is waiting in the hall, leaning against the wall with a contented smile on her face.

"Our family just got a little bigger," she says.

I pull her into my arms. "I know. I wouldn't change a thing, though," I murmur into her hair. "Every struggle brought us closer together. As long as I have you and our family, I have the world."

Chapter Thirty

Yelena

~One Year Later~

The fire crackles and pops, sending sparks swirling up into the night sky. The full moon shines down on us, bathing us in silvery light. The whole pack is out here tonight. The music is blasting, the children are all running around underfoot. Couples are starting to pair off, canoodling on the dance floor and in the dark corners.

I take a sip of my hot chocolate and sigh in contentment.

This time last year, I would never have imagined that this could be my life. Cleo and I back on the pack's land. Me being mated to Austin. Being the Luna of the Nightwing Pack. Adopting Gage.

It's been a crazy year, but I wouldn't change a thing for the world.

My eyes find Austin across the fire. He's smiling, carefree in a way that I haven't seen in so long. His eyes meet mine, and his smile softens, full of love and promise.

I shiver. This bonfire is so different from the ones we've had in the past. My mind flits to the memories of when Austin and I struggled. The way he would avoid me, and I would hide in the shadows.

Those days are long past and while they're painful to think about, it's incredible to

realize the growth and love that we've shared once we embraced our Fate. We're together, and we're happy.

I don't think I'll ever stop getting the butterflies around this man. We've come through the darkness forever, guided by the moon, and now we're finally in a good place.

For the first time in possibly ever, I feel at peace. Cleo comes over and places her hand on my arm, and then grins, reaching down to tickle my belly.

I laugh and capture her arms before pulling her into my embrace. "What are you doing, you silly girl?" I tease, pressing a kiss to her cheek.

"Saying hello!" she giggles.

"Well, hello!" I respond, holding her close. She squirms and squints her eyes at me.

"Not to you, Mama. To the new flames!"

I blink and look at her in confusion. She sighs with the exasperation of a child twice her age and grabs my hand, forcing me to touch my belly.

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She closes her eyes and concentrates. “There’s a flame here,” she says, placing my hand on one side. “And one here,” she continues, moving it to the other side.

“They’re both very happy flames. And strong. When they come out, they will turn into brothers!”

I freeze and look down at my belly. Flames? Brothers? Oh, my goddess. Am I actually pregnant?

I rub my belly fondly and close my eyes, hoping it’s true. Growing a family with Austin is the dream of my heart.

“Don’t worry, mama,” Cleo says happily, “These brother flames are going to be just fine. And so are you.”

She hops off my lap, leaving me stunned. “Can I tell Brother and Daddy? Please, Mama? Please, can I tell them?” she begs.

I shake my head and find a place to sit. “No, sweetheart. I think I want to tell them tonight. How many babies or flames do you think are in there?”

She touches my belly again, and then her face breaks out into a huge grin. “Two. Definitely two flames.”

I swallow hard. It’s difficult enough to be pregnant, but with twins? Holy crap.

She pouts but agrees. “I’m going to go play with Jewel now,” she says happily.

I watch her disappear into the crowd before I let myself rest my hand on my belly. I've thought I might be pregnant for several weeks now. I've waited to share it to be sure, but there's no question now. And if Cleo is correct and there are twins in there...wow. Who would have thought?

I wonder how Austin will react when I tell him tonight. I hope he'll be as happy as I am, though I know he'll also worry. Things have finally settled down in the pack, Austin has been busy with his leadership duties and pack business but I'm so proud of the Alpha he has become. I sigh and look down at my belly. And now our lives are about to change again in a big way.

My mind drifts as I think about what we have. It's a truly beautiful life we share. The Moon Goddess has blessed us over and over again.

I take a deep breath and rub my belly again, feeling a swell of emotions. I'm pregnant with twins! I can hardly believe it.

"Hello," I whisper, "I'm your Mama."

When I look up, I can feel eyes on me. Austin is staring at me from across the bonfire with a peculiar expression on his face.

I rub my belly again and he freezes for a half second. But, before I can even blink, he's handing his beer to Vincent and running toward me.

"Yelena!" he calls out as he reaches my table. I laugh when he skids to a stop and knocks over a few napkins onto the ground.

"Yes, Alpha?" I respond coyly.

His eyes drop to my belly, and he carefully reaches out to touch it.

“Are you?” he asks. He’s looking at me with such hope that I can bear to keep him waiting any longer.

“Yes.” I whisper, “And according to Cleo, we’re having a two-for-one special!” I joke.

Austin pales a little but then rallies and presses his hand to my stomach.

“I am so excited to meet you, little wolves,” he whispers, leaning down to press a kiss to my belly.

When he straightens, he reaches over to press a kiss to my lips as well.

“You look gorgeous, and you are the best mother,” he says, rubbing my shoulders.

“We’re going to be fine.”

“Do you ever wonder if Callie saw this?” I blurt out, looking over at Austin.

He stops what he’s doing and thinks about it for a minute.

“The Moon Goddess has a plan,” he says, looking up at the moon. “Isn’t that what she always used to say?”

I nod, brushing away a tear from my eye. “Yeah, she said that frequently.”

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I miss you, Callie.

I wish she could be here and whisper her special blessings over my children. To love and cherish them, like she loved me.

I place Austin's hand on my belly again and lean into him. Our family is growing, and our lives have come full circle.

Callie may be gone, but Austin and I will carry on her legacy of hope and light.

Our pack has been through so much, but we've emerged stronger.

Austin has grown so much as our Alpha. He is strong and wise but also open-minded and kind. Our little ones will be lucky to have him as a father. I know he'll teach them the importance of leadership, compassion, and justice.

I can already imagine Cleo fussing over her new baby siblings and Gage pledging to defend them with his life.

As for me, I finally feel like I've found my place in this world. I feel at home in my skin, in our pack.

We have created something beautiful here. This family and community we've built, it's everything I've ever dreamed of.

The fire crackles merrily beside us, keeping the chill of the night at bay. Above us, the moon glows full and bright, bathing us in silver light. I gaze up at her pockmarked

face and send a silent prayer into the darkness.

Guide us on this journey into the unknown. Let your laughter echo in the voices of my children, and your strength flow through their veins. We will teach them your stories and remind them that even on the darkest night, the moon still shines.

I place my hand on my belly, which holds the future of our pack, and I swear that I hear Callie's voice drifting to my ears on the wind. Fate is never wrong.

The End