



The Silent Mate

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Category: Romance, New Adult, Paranormal

Description: A broken hero werewolf romance.

Since a tragic attack at the age of five rendered him disfigured and unable to speak, Malik contented himself to a life in the shadows. Ashamed of what he'd become, he forsook his birthright to lead and instead honed himself into a ruthless warrior, blackening his heart to mirror his monstrous appearance. Now serving as his younger brother's prized weapon and enforcer, Malik strikes fear into the hearts of all who cross the Intonat Nocte Pack.

And yet, when fate ties his life to a young woman with a heart as beautiful as her appearance, Malik must step out of the shadows to claim her as his own.

After a lifetime of loss, he will not allow anyone to steal her from him.

The Silent Mate is a steamy, broken hero werewolf romance with fated mates and a guaranteed HEA. For readers who enjoy misunderstood, scarred MMC's and the kind-hearted FMC's who love every part of them, scars and all. At just under 60k words, this is a short yet deeply-emotional read that promises to bring the spice with the sweet.

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ARIA

When my mother died two months ago, a piece of my father died too. That's the sad thing about mates. One can't live without the other. Not really. Not meaningfully.

If my mother was still alive, maybe Dad would've been strong enough to fight. Instead, he bent the knee and offered his loyalty—and our entire pack's loyalty—to a monster. To the infamously cruel alpha of theIntonat NoctePack.

The negotiations took place two nights ago, shortly after theIntonat NoctePack stormed our territory under the cover of darkness. My small, peacekeeping pack never stood a chance, and Dad surrendered to save our friends and family.

It made me sick.

I glared up at the sprawling mansion and wrinkled my nose. It looked more like a castle than a home.Goddess,why the hell did this bastard feel the need to conquer anyone when he owned something like this?

“Aria,” Dad warned, his voice a low, hoarse grumble. “Don't look so disgusted.”

I hadn't realized I'd stopped walking in the middle of the cobblestone drive to gawk at theIntonat Noctecompound. It was unlike anything I'd seen before.

Born into theAurorasPack, I was accustomed to life without extravagance. We were a

small pack of thirty-two members. My mother homeschooled me throughout my youth, and my father taught me to shift and fight. I was training to become a nurse under our pack's old doctor. A simple existence, yes, but I had everything I needed.

Now, twenty years later, one greedy, power-hungry alpha had ruined it all.

"Sorry," I muttered, averting my eyes before anyone could witness my revulsion. "I just don't understand why I had to come."

The rest of our pack—ouroldpack—had been allowed to stay at home. Our new Alpha, Alpha Roman, didn't seem to care where we lived, so long as we paid homage to him with quarterly taxes and answered his summons when needed.

Dad shot me a weary look. Dark circles sagged beneath his blue eyes, duller than I'd seen them since Mom's death. He looked like he'd aged a lifetime in the span of two days.

"I told you. When Alpha Roman heard I had a daughter, he wanted to meet you," he explained for the third time that morning, rubbing at his patchy beard.

He was hiding something. He'd never been a very good liar, and I'd learned to read the signs when I was a girl.

He could barely hold my gaze, fidgeting like a nervous boy rather than a fifty year old alpha-male. Tension lined his shoulders, and I could sense the anxiety rolling off of him in waves through the bond between alpha and subject—father and daughter. Something wasverywrong.

My chest tightened, further restricting the air that I struggled to pull into my lungs. I didn't push him any further as we walked toward the front door and knocked to announce our arrival.

Of course, the Intonat Nocte Pack already knew we were there. They'd likely been tracking our movements throughout our entire journey to the center of their territory. Although we hadn't seen anyone, man or wolf, since we arrived, I felt their eyes following us.

Heavy footsteps sounded behind the iron arch door, and I subtly stepped behind my father's shoulders. Once, his broad frame might've been able to completely obscure me from view. Now, his posture exposed his growing frailty.

The door opened with a creak, and I peeked around Dad's shoulder to find a huge warrior staring down at us. He had short blonde hair, buzzed to the scalp, and a slightly crooked jaw.

The man's eyes, dark as a midnight sky, flickered between me and my father, seemingly unimpressed. "You're Mason Knox?"

My fingers curled into fists at my sides. Alpha Mason Knox, I wanted to correct him, but my father wasn't an alpha anymore. He'd relinquished that title the moment he bowed his head to another.

Dad nodded. "And this is my daughter, Aria."

The brute in the doorway appraised me, his eyes lingering for a moment longer than necessary, before stepping aside. "Come in. Alpha Roman is expecting you."

I felt his lecherous gaze trail after me as we entered the pack house, barely concealing a shudder. The interior of the mansion was as foreboding as the exterior. With gray walls and dark decorations, I felt like I'd stepped back in time.

I shouldn't have been surprised. As I'd learned in my History of the North American Packs classes, the Intonat Nocte Pack was one of the four founding packs in the

northern continent. Their history spanned centuries, extending back to the first werewolf settlers that reached the Canadian shores from Scandinavia.

“Through here,” the man barked, leading us deeper into the castle.

With wide eyes, I took in every little detail. Massive, six-foot-tall portraits of old alphas and lunas glared blankly ahead, and I swore their eyes moved as I hurried behind my father. Wearing a pair of jeans and a pretty white blouse, I felt horribly out of place amongst the architecture and decorations.

As the warrior led us through the halls, the knots in my gut tightened. Something sparked to life in my blood, an instinctual urge to travel further into the compound. Unlike anything I’d ever felt before...

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It's just your nerves, I told myself, inhaling a deep breath to calm the frantic racing of my heart.

Finally, we reached a pair of double doors nestled deep in the center of the castle. I wiped my palms on my thighs, hyper-aware that my fingers trembled. I needed to get a hold of myself. The people on the other side of these doors would be able to smell my fear, and werewolves saw fear as weakness.

And most packs sought to exterminate any weakness from their ranks.

The doors groaned as they opened, and a delicious wave of tobacco leaf and mint filled my lungs, infiltrated my veins, and settled straight in my core. Warmth gathered there, seeping to that sensitive spot between my thighs.

Oh hell.

The force of the scent—and its incredible impact on my body—nearly brought me to my knees. My cheeks flamed, and I lingered in the doorway, even as every fiber in me begged to race into the room and find the source of the arousing smell.

“Aria,” my father called, firm, glancing over his shoulder with furrowed brows. He used his signature alpha voice. The one that couldn't be disobeyed by subordinates.

I ducked my head, keeping my eyes trained on my shoes, and heeded his silent command.

The incredible scent only increased in potency when I reached the center of the room,

but I kept my head bowed. Because, in addition to the overbearingly delicious combination of tobacco and mint, an undeniable pulse of power filled the space.

The type of power only possessed by an alpha.

Every lupine instinct in my blood warned me to submit, but I remained on my feet. Alpha Roman hadn't yet done anything to prove that he deserved me on my knees.

"Ah, Mason," a deep voice hummed from the opposite end of the room. "I'm pleased you came."

"As you requested, Alpha Roman, I brought my daughter," Dad replied, every word stiff and formal.

"Yes, I see," Alpha Roman drawled, and I felt the heat of his slow perusal. "And I am very pleased..."

Unease skittered down my spine, in direct conflict with the warmth that had previously churned at my center. I dared to peek up, barely lifting my brow enough to see my new alpha through thick dark lashes.

My heart battered against my ribcage as my eyes met those of the Intonat Nocteleader. At least half a dozen men and women stood on his flanks, guards and advisors, no doubt, but I paid no attention to them.

Alpha Roman sat on a medieval-looking throne at the center of a dais, and his broad frame filled every inch of that giant chair of honor. A tailored suit covered his body, contrasting the gothic architecture of the throne and room. Dark hair, short and groomed to perfection, adorned his head like a crown, and he wore a wicked, hungry smile.

My blood turned to ice. Alpha Roman's presence overshadowed everything else, and any thought of that tantalizing scent of tobacco and mint disappeared as my survival instincts took control.

"I'm glad," Dad croaked, although his voice shook and betrayed his horror.

The lupine grin on Alpha Roman's lips only grew as he slowly stood from his throne. With slow, arrogant movements, he stepped off of the dais, black eyes never leaving me.

I was old enough to know when a male wanted me. I'd seen desire in enough gazes to know that they found me beautiful. I possessed my mother's honey blonde waves and soft features, paired with my father's dark blue eyes. In the summer before my sixteenth birthday, I sprouted from a gangly, awkward girl into a woman.

Now, four years later, I'd earned the attention of one of the continent's most powerful alphas. I should've been honored. Instead, his heated gaze made me feel...dirty.

It felt wrong. Repulsive. As if my body yearned for the admiration of another.

"She's a bit skinny," Alpha Roman mused, his lips pinching into a thin line as he studied me like a piece of livestock. "But, as long as she has alpha's blood, I suppose she'll do the job..."

Alarms blared in my mind, and I ripped my attention from Alpha Roman to stare at my father. "Dad, what is he talking about?"

Guilt glossed the surface of his eyes as he shook his head apologetically. His lips cracked open, but no words escaped.

"Dad?" I repeated, louder.

A low chuckle rumbled from the chest of my new alpha, who'd stalked closer until he stood directly in front of me. When he spoke, the scent of iron wafted over me. "Did your father fail to tell you the terms of his surrender, little girl?"

I recoiled. "What are you talking about?"

Alpha Roman cocked his head, predatory. "I've found myself in need of an heir."

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He lifted a hand toward my cheek as if he wanted to stroke it, and nausea swelled up my throat.

No.

This couldn't be happening. There was still so much I needed to do. I wanted to serve my pack as a nurse. Wanted to remain by my father's side while he grieved for the loss of Mom. Wanted the chance to find my true,fatedmate...

My father, the man who I trusted most in my life, had betrayed me. Gave me to another to be used and discarded as soon as I provided a son—an heir.

Tears spilled over the edges of my eyes, little salty rivers falling down my cheeks. I tried to yank away from Alpha Roman's looming fingers but couldn't escape. I clamped my eyes shut and prepared for his touch.

It never came.

Instead, a low, menacing growl rose from the dais, where Alpha Roman's guards and advisors stood watching. A warning, cold and lethal, and my body immediately reacted to it. Goosebumps peppered every inch of my skin, even as the blood warmed in my veins.

The overbearing sense of dread dissipated in an instant, and I wrenched my eyes open again.

Alpha Roman had frozen, every honed muscle in his body going dangerously still,

and palpable anger simmered off of him. Even so, he made no move to touch me again.

Because, on the dais, another male had stepped forward, and the faintest hint of tobacco and mint washed over me.

My eyes traveled up the length of this new man's body.

Impossibly long, powerful legs covered by form-fitting dress pants. A white, button-down shirt stretched tight over his tapered torso, hugging shoulders that somehow seemed even larger than Alpha Roman's. Disconcertingly large muscles rippled beneath the thin fabric, and the smallest hint of dark hair and tattoos peeked beyond its unbuttoned neckline.

Shoulder-length brown hair fell around his neck, a bit messy and disheveled, like he hadn't bothered brushing it. A thick, short beard covered his sharp jawline that my fingers itched to trace, and his face...

I froze. Fear wrapped its poisonous talons around my throat, suffocating.

Three ridged scars ruined one half of his face, extending from brow to lip. His eye on the ruined side was a shade too pale and stared blankly ahead, clearly no longer viable. Red, inflamed tissue twisted the ruined corner of his lips.

But his appearance, however scarred and intimidating, was not what frightened me so much. No.

I was terrified of the glint of pure, unadulterated possession in his stormy gaze. A gaze that stripped me bare and left me defenseless. Claiming and brutal and nothing like I imagined.

Surely this couldn't be correct. There must've been some mistake...

At the same time, every fiber in my being screamed one word, and I knew this was no mistake.

Mate.

2

MALIK

Red lined my vision as my brother lifted his hand to touch my mate.

Mymate.

Mine.

I'd known it the moment she walked into the formal meeting hall, head bowed and demure. Pliant and obedient. Submissive to another male.

My hands balled into trembling fists as familiar, volatile anger simmered in my veins. I inhaled once, desperate to draw the scent of her, a tantalizing combination of honeysuckle and pear, into my lungs. It consumed me, momentarily taming my burning need to punish every male in the room who looked at her with desire in their eyes.

I resisted the urge to storm off of the dais and rip my brother and alpha away from her. I could, and, Goddess, in that moment, I wanted to. I'd never wanted to harm him before. I'd devoted my entire life to protecting him—serving him.

Yet this female, a blessing from the Moon Goddess herself, eclipsed any sense of duty

that I possessed for my brother. She was a stranger, but she was mine.

And Roman wanted to claim her for himself.

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A low, rasping growl grumbled from my chest. Pain grated at my throat as a result, but I didn't care. I needed to stop this.

My brother immediately responded to my raw warning, his fingers pausing mere centimeters from Aria Knox's rosy cheeks. The muscles in his back went still, a predator that had been temporarily leashed.

I could scent little Aria's relief. Saw her round, blue eyes wrench open to find me on the dais.

Yes. Search forme, little dove, I wanted to say. Wanted to beckon her to me, tuck her against my side and take her far, faraway from this place.

This innate urge to protect and possess her increased tenfold when her gaze finally found me, drinking in the sight of me from bottom to top. The world stood still as her eyes traveled up my legs, grazed the length of my torso and studied my shoulders, and finally...

She stiffened, fear pooling in her blue eyes and permeating off of her in waves.

I almost flinched. Almost.

I'd been a fool to believe that my fate-given mate would be unaffected by my scarred face. I'd seen enough disgust and alarm on the faces of those I crossed on a daily basis to know that most found my appearance repulsive.

A bitter smile twisted on my lips. If you think I'm so ugly now, little dove, you

should've seen me when the attack first happened.

I looked like a fuckin' prince by comparison. Twenty-four years prior, the right side of my head had been reduced to a mangled mess of skin and muscle and bone...

I shouldn't have felt the impact of her revulsion so profoundly. Should've been accustomed to the effects I had on others by now. Even so, my hands curled into fists, claws biting into the skin of my palms.

Malik? Roman's voice filled my head through our mind-link—a bond shared between all werewolves of the same pack—demanding and impatient. The voice of an alpha who had been interrupted by a subordinate.

I fought the urge to growl again and instead willed a semblance of respect into my response. She's mine.

Again, the muscles lining Roman's back pulled taut, and he stood a bit straighter. My claim surprised him.

You're certain? He challenged, apprehension lacing the words. At last, he turned his head to face me, as if he needed to see the truth in my eyes. A fate bond?

I nodded, just a subtle dip of my chin. I wouldn't deign to clarify any further. To question my claim again would be seen as a sign of disrespect, punishable by death. Even an alpha would bend to the will of Fate. Even the strongest answered to a higher power.

A muscle in Roman's jaw twitched, the only sign of his anger.

He couldn't have anticipated this. Desperate for an heir and without a fated mate himself, he'd been planning to take Mason Knox's daughter to bed since the moment

he learned that the old man possessed a breedable daughter.

Then, when Aria walked through the formal meeting hall's doors and Roman laid eyes on her, she became far more than a vessel for a son. Her beauty and innocence made her a prize for my brother. His desire had been so palpable, I could still taste it in the air, heady and thick.

The thought had the primal, lupine force nestled deep in my body prowling to life, incensed by the very thought of my brother taking what belonged to me. Again.

I ground my teeth together in a painful exercise of control.

Like flipping a switch, Roman conjured an easy smile on his lips and turned back to Aria. He lifted his hand to her face again. I tensed.

"It seems that you belong to another," he mused, tracing a knuckle across her cheekbone.

Another deep, gravelly warning rose within me, although the sound was too hoarse. Too easily ignored. My body began to tremble.

Roman did not cease his taunting, pinching Aria's chin between his thumb and forefinger and forcing her to hold his gaze as he continued. "A beautiful golden flower, bound to my most prized monster."

Monster. The nickname Roman had bestowed on me when I was seven and he was six. When it became clear that our father favored an heir who could speak instead of his firstborn son. When I was informed that my value now rested in my ability to kill for the sake of the Intonat Nocte Pack. For Roman.

Aria's eyes widened in alarm, but she dared not jerk out of my brother's hold.

I took a slow step forward, every muscle in my body humming with the urge to attack anything that threatened this female. As I moved, however, several of my brother's guards shifted as well, prepared to intervene the moment my control snapped.

The energy in the room turned volatile, charged with a dangerous cocktail of pheromones and instinct that could ignite at any second.

Roman knew that he played a dangerous game, but he reveled in it. Hewantedme to attack but knew that I wouldn't. I owed him too much.

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“How ironic,” Roman chuckled, finally dropping his hand from my little mate’s cheek. At last, he stepped away from her and addressed Mason Knox again. “You may return to your home. Your daughter is no longer your concern.”

“But—” Mason began, turning his horror-filled eyes in my direction. As if this pathetic man could not fathom abandoning his daughter to a man like me, whereas moments before he’d been prepared to hand her to Roman to save his own neck.

As if he feared I might harm her. As if he thought I could ever raise a hand to the most precious gift I’d ever been granted...

I still didn’t entirely believe it. Could this be a mistake? A part of me worried that fate would snatch Aria away from me, seconds before I touched her with my corrupt hands. Surely such a pure, beautiful thing was not meant to be tainted by a man like me.

It had been years—decades—since I’d truly had something of my own. From the moment my father renounced my position as his heir, I’d spent every waking moment of my life serving him and my brother. Playing the role of fearsome general and guard dog. Blooding my hands so that they didn’t have to.

I’d lost so much in the last twenty four years. My inheritance. My father’s approval. My face. My voice.

I’d be damned if I lost my mate, too.

My brother turned away from Aria and Mason and walked back to the dais,

seemingly bored of the situation.

“It seems our business is finished,” he drawled, an undercurrent of annoyance in his tone. “Malik, take your mate away, but be back in my office in an hour.”

I stiffened but didn’t bother responding with a nod or through our mind-link. Roman knew that I wouldn’t neglect his orders, even if it meant neglecting my little dove in the first hours of our meeting.

My eyes flickered back to Aria and her father, and something like pity clenched at my chest. She’d rushed away from the center of the room and thrown herself in her father’s arms, clutching at his shoulders.

Even though she whispered, I could still hear her soft pleas. “Dad. Dad, please. Please don’t make me stay. I want to go home with you. P-Please.”

A frown etched across my brow. I hated the desperation in her voice. Not because I didn’t want her to feel the emotion. Rather, I hated the impact that it had on me.

I wasn’t used to...feeling.

I’d learned to shut that part of myself off a long time ago. To become the monster that my brother needed me to be, I had to.

Yet, in the span of minutes, Aria Knox had ripped me open and rendered me defenseless. My connection to this girl left me exposed to the sharp, intense emotions that I’d fought so hard to bury. Her emotions.

Roman chuckled, lowering himself into the throne of our ancestors. “I’m afraid you won’t be going anywhere. You see, my brother belongs by my side, and you belong by his side. I’m sure I don’t need to explain that fated pairings cannot function

properly without one another?”

His words were cruel and insensitive, but not incorrect. Even if I wanted to allow Aria to return home with her father, our wolves wouldn't survive that. From the moment our eyes locked, our lives were bound together.

She was mine, and I was hers.

For better or worse.

“My heart, I am so sorry,” Mason whispered, tenderly brushing his old, feeble hands through her honeyed locks. “I wish there was something I could do...”

My pulse quickened, and I fought the irrational, innate need to punish this old fool for merely suggesting that he wished to take Aria away from me. No longer willing or able to tether myself to the tight confines of propriety, I stalked off of the dais.

Enough.

Although Aria faced away from me, she stiffened as I drew closer, as if she also felt the distance between our bodies growing shorter and shorter. My blood simmered as I inhaled her scent, bathing in the honey sweetness.

When she turned to face me, she bravely placed herself between me and her father, undoubtedly able to sense that I hung on by a thread. Her blue eyes brimmed with tears and fear and something else...curiosity?

The tightness in my chest bordered on uncomfortable, and my heightened emotions made my head spin. As a result, when I reached her, I callously grabbed her wrist and tugged her away from her father.

I wanted her out of that throne room. Wanted her hidden from the lecherous eyes of every other unmated male in the room.

She gasped, a rogue tear slipping down her cheek as she looked back at her father in farewell. Yet, when I began to lead her away, she came willingly, of her own accord.

As if she knew that fighting was futile. Because, deep down, she knew that she belonged to me.

Mine.

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3

ARIA

“Aria!” Desperation clung to my father’s voice.

I watched over my shoulder as he tried to chase me down, but two imposing Intonat Nocteguards blocked his path. He struggled against them to no avail, arms flailing and cheeks pale with panic.

Tears prickled my eyes.

I should’ve fought. Should’ve demanded that this male—Malik, apparently—allow me to stay with my father. He needed me, far more than any soul in the Intonat NoctePack. And yet...

I went with Malik willingly.

Calloused fingers were wrapped firmly around my wrist, tugging me toward an exit with surprising speed. Little electric pulses stemmed from the spot where our skin touched. I blindly stumbled forward, never tearing my gaze away from my father.

Then, the door to the throne room slammed shut with a finality that I felt in my bones, and I lost sight of my father.

“P-please, make sure they don’t hurt him!” I cried, finally turning my attention back to the long-haired man in front of me.

He didn't address my concerns, only kept tugging me along as if he hadn't even heard me. Up close, he was even larger than I initially thought. The top of my head barely reached his shoulders, and one hand looked wide enough to wrap around my throat and snuff the life out of me without a second thought.

Monster. Wasn't that what Alpha Roman had called him? His brother?

Unease clenched at my gut. The scars on his face, however gruesome they appeared, didn't warrant such a nickname. Perhaps he'd earned the title through his actions rather than his outward appearance. Perhaps fate had linked my life to a killer— heartless and inhumane.

That thought terrified me more than any scar ever would.

Even so, a small, cowardly part of me was grateful that I couldn't see his face as we marched down the hallway. I needed time to compose myself. Needed time to reconstruct my resolve after the jarring last few minutes of my life.

Malik's long, aggressive strides didn't slow until we reached a staircase at the far end of the hall. It dawned on me then that I didn't know where he was taking me, or what he planned on doing once we arrived.

I'd heard horror stories. Some men believed that a fated mate bond gave them the right to do whatever they pleased with their mate's body.

Malik hadn't spoken a word since I laid eyes on him. I didn't have an inkling of his character but knew that I saw possession and hunger in his churning, storm-like eye. How could I know what he planned on doing to me once we arrived at our destination?

I sniffed and wiped furiously at the tears staining my cheeks with my free hand. I

hadn't realized they'd fallen.

"Tell me if my father is safe. Please," I tried again, willing strength and conviction into my words.

At long last, he glanced over his shoulder, revealing the unscarred half of his face.

My heart palpated. I'd never paid so much attention to a man's profile before but somehow knew that no other could compare to Malik. He was handsome, with a strong jawline and straight nose. Once, perhaps, he might've been blessed with perfect symmetry.

He nodded, a subtle dip of his chin, before tightening his hold on my wrist and leading me up the stairs.

I frowned. Was my father safe, then? Or did that nod mean something else? Goddess, why didn't he just answer me?

Unless...

Unless he couldn't speak. And if he couldn't speak, I wouldn't be able to communicate with him. At least until I was initiated into the In-tonat Nocte Pack and gained access to their mind-link, which could take weeks. Or we consummated our mate bond.

My mother once told me that the first...joining officially cements a mate bond. It marks the moment when the two souls, after a lifetime apart, finally become one again.

My stomach dipped at the thought, and I stared at my feet, praying that my blush would disappear before we reached the top of the stairs. Now wasn't the time to think

about such things.

When we climbed to the second floor, he led me directly to a closed door. He released my hand and dug around in his pocket before pulling out a key ring. Several silver keys jingled on the ring, but he selected one to unlock this mysterious door and pushed inside.

With hesitant steps, I followed him in.

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A plain, almost empty room greeted me. One king-sized bed rested on the far wall, a gray quilt draped over the mattress with sparse pillows decorating the headboard. Two nightstands bracketed the bed's sides, and a single wardrobe stood tall by the windows. The walls didn't contain a single decoration.

The drapes were open, allowing sunlight to stream into the otherwise dark, plain space.

"Is this... your bedroom?" I wondered, chewing on my bottom lip. I wrapped my arms around my waist, fingers clenched around the fabric of my blouse.

Another small dip of his chin, further confirming my theory that Malik could not speak.

"It— It's so empty," I whispered, daring another step into the room.

It looked nothing like my bedroom back home. In fact, it looked like no one had stepped foot in it in months. The more that my eyes wandered, the more I realized that the room held no trace of Malik—no trace of life—anywhere.

I inhaled deep and found stale traces of tobacco and mint. It smelt like he hadn't slept in this room in weeks, if not longer. Did that mean he slept elsewhere? Perhaps he owned multiple rooms in this castle-like home? Or, maybe he slept in someone else's room instead?

My stomach twisted at the idea of this man—this stranger—with another. The taste of iron coated my tongue, and I realized too late that I'd gnawed through the external

skin on my lip.

Goddess, please don't let my mate's heart belong to another woman, I silently prayed.

The hair on the back of my neck stood tall, and when I looked up, I found Malik watching me intently. His eyes, one pale and sightless and the other intense gray, narrowed, as if faced with a puzzle he couldn't begin to solve. His lips pulled into a thin line, the scarred portion puckering in the slightest.

I forced myself to hold his authoritative gaze, refusing to shy away from the power emanating off of him or the sight of his disfigurement.

I swallowed my nerves and, desperate to fill the silence, decided to properly introduce myself. We'd met under unideal circumstances, after all. "My name is Aria. Aria Knox."

Disconcertingly, his expression didn't shift. He continued to watch me carefully, like a specimen under a microscope. Was he displeased?

My fingers fidgeted with the hem of my white blouse, and I suddenly wished that I'd worn something nicer. A dress, maybe. Or, at least my favorite bra that made my modest breasts appear a size larger than they were.

Even more, I wished that I didn't care what this man thought of me. I'd never concerned myself with the opinion of any man, other than Dad, before.

This is no ordinary man, I reminded myself. Our souls were linked. We shared an instinctual, primitive bond that I could already feel in the very fiber of my being, drawing me to him. I couldn't fathom how it could somehow grow stronger and more profound once we took the final step.

If we took the final step. I couldn't read his scrutinizing glare. What if he didn't want me? Did I even want him to want me?

When it became evident that Malik had no intention of replying, verbally or otherwise, heat crept up my neck. My fingers curled into fists at my side as frustration threatened to rear its ugly head. How in the hells did he expect us to communicate?

"Can you speak?" I asked, adrenaline loosening my lips, no longer willing to beat around the bush.

A little line creased between his stern brow, and his eyes hardened. For a moment, I feared I'd offended him. My question, admittedly, lacked tact...

But, slowly, Malik stepped closer, a predator on the prowl. My heart accelerated, and I had to tilt my chin up to hold his gaze as he came to a stop mere paces in front of me. The delicious combination of his scent washed over me, and I fought the urge to close the distance between our bodies, if only to wrap myself in the essence of him.

One of his hands lifted from his side, and, for a moment, I hoped he would bridge the distance between our bodies to touch me.

Instead, he brought it to his own neck and rubbed at a spot just beneath his Adam's apple. I narrowed my eyes, daring a step closer, and Malik tipped his head back.

A soft gasp slipped past my lips when I saw it.

Where his full, short beard faded into stubble, an angry scar stretched horizontally across his neck. The line was jagged, as if a dull, serrated knife had been used to saw away at flesh and bone and tendon.

Or, not a knife at all. A jagged claw could've inflicted that sort of damage. More than likely the same claw that ruined the right side of his face.

Malik's answer was clear. No, he couldn't speak.

A shudder trickled down my spine. How could anyone, even someone blessed with the enhanced healing of a shifter, survive that?

"Oh." I swallowed, goosebumps skimming up and down my arms. "How did that happen?"

The question slipped out before I could stop it.

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Idiot, I internally cursed myself. I barely knew this man! How could I expect him to divulge the details of such a horrific attack to me? Not to mention, he could hardly tell me, anyways.

Malik lowered his chin, concealing the scar from direct view once more. A muscle in his jaw twitched, the only semblance of a reaction to my thoughtless question.

I feared I'd angered him.

His broad chest expanded with a deep inhale, and he suddenly spun away from me. He walked toward one of the nightstands and started rummaging through its top drawer. When he turned back to me, he held a pen and notepad in his hands and scrawled something on the yellow lined paper.

I didn't realize I'd been holding my breath until he handed me the notepad, and messy handwriting greeted me on the top page.

I need to get back to my brother.

Do not leave this room until I return.

I frowned at the blunt note. No greeting. No mention of the strange situation we found ourselves in or the bond that now bound our lives together. Nothing. Only a hasty order and vague explanation of brotherly duty.

"But-"

The words caught on my tongue when I looked up, only to realize that my massive mate was already stalking toward the exit. He slammed the door shut behind him, walls rattling, followed by the soft click of a lock slipping into place.

I gaped at the place where he'd stood only moments before, my strength faltering with every beat of silence that settled over me. My fingers trembled, and I dropped the notepad to the floor before staggering toward the bed.

My head pounded, the stresses of the last hour finally crashing over me like waves against a cliff. But, even more poignant, a deep ache thrummed in my chest. I clutched at my breast, just above my heart, where it felt like a small chasm had formed, splintering with every passing second.

I'd never experienced anything like it, but I recognized the ache immediately. My body was protesting his abrupt departure.

It mourned the absence of its mate. The male who had saved me from a life as an alpha's breeding stock but snatched me away from a father that needed me. The silent warrior who seemingly wanted nothing to do with me.

My so-called monster.

4

ARIA

I perched on the edge of the bed and waited for Malik's return. And waited. And waited.

One hour passed, then another. Before I knew it, the sky began to darken. Every time I heard footsteps on the other side of the locked door, I sat up a bit straighter, only to

slouch again when the soft thuds faded down the hallway again.

Every so often, I stood from the mattress and paced the room, eyes peeled for any small detail that I might've missed before. There was nothing. Only the lifeless room that could've been mistaken for a hotel advertisement—impersonal and free from any heart.

I stood by the window, observing the entirety of the space and trying to imagine its potential.

If this was going to be my new home, I'd need to make some serious changes. Add a picture frame and some color, at least. Hopefully my mate wouldn't mind adding an assortment of blue pillows to his plain gray quilt. Or yellow! Yellow was the happiest color, after all, and, based on first impressions, it seemed like Malik could use a bit of that in his life...

I blinked, putting a stop to my wandering mind.

I shouldn't get ahead of myself. There was a very real chance that Malik had no intention of sharing this bedroom with me.

My stomach twisted to the point of pain. Sighing, I turned my attention back to the door and hugged my waist with both arms, as if that might mend the ache I felt in my core.

"Where are you?" I whispered to my absent mate.

Another hour passed. The clock read 6:30 PM, but it felt like the middle of the night. Exhaustion settled over my bones. I felt mentally and physically fatigued from the events of the day.

I'd started the day angry and nervous, fortifying myself to meet the alpha who'd conquered my beloved pack and forced my father to submit. Then, I'd been hit by a serious case of emotional whiplash when Alpha Roman announced his intent to use my body for the sake of producing an heir, only for the largest, most fearsome looking male I'd ever seen to step forward and claim me as his own. Not to mention, my own father had planned on using me as a bargaining chip with Alpha Roman. That betrayal would take time to sort through...

Even now, conflicting sweeps of elation and fear and grief coursed through my body. It didn't help that, with every moment that passed, a new worry chewed at my mind. What if Malik doesn't want me? Will he even come back for me?

It was all so overwhelming. My head spun as I tried to process it all.

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“Goddess, help me,” I groaned, collapsing back on the bed and staring at the ceiling.

I refused to accept rejection from my mate. Of course, the circumstances of our first meeting were awkward, and it didn’t help that we couldn’t effectively communicate. But surely he couldn’t give up on our fated bond after a measly fifteen minutes in my company?

Turning my head toward the door, I considered exiting the room. He’d locked the door from the outside, meaning I could still leave. Surely it wouldn’t be too difficult to locate that hulking mountain-of-a-man inside this place?

I chewed on my inner cheek. No, this castle is freakin’ enormous. Not to mention it’s filled with dozens of equally enormous and intimidating shifters. I shivered and decided to stay in the room, like Malik’s note ordered.

But if I kept staring at the door, I would go insane. Even more, I felt pathetic—like a lost puppy waiting at the window for its owner to return.

No, that’s not me.

My mate wouldn’t reject me. I wouldn’t allow it.

Instead of sulking, it was time to make myself at home.

MALIK

Every fiber in my body itched to be reunited with my little dove.

I'd spent the better part of four fucking hours by my brother's side, wasted discussing plans for his next campaign to expand his control over the region. He sensed my agitation, no doubt, and decided to keep the advisors gathered for an hour longer than usual.

I saw it in Roman's eyes. That familiar glimmer of smug arrogance that always filled his eyes—our father's eyes—when he wanted to make a show of his power. He asserted his authority when he felt threatened, as if he liked to remind me of who our father appointed as heir.

As if I could ever forget.

I knew he felt threatened today. When I marked my claim on little Aria and snatched her from beneath his nose. Although he'd been forced to submit to the laws of a fated mate bond, Roman wanted me to know that he would never bow to me.

I didn't need the reminder. I simply needed to return to my mate.

With every moment spent away from the girl, my chest tightened with an innate, primal need to claim her. To protect what was mine.

By now, every soul in the In-tonat Nocte Pack had undoubtedly heard about what transpired in the throne room. Word traveled unfathomably fast among shifters who shared a mind-link. Only a handful of my pack mates—friends that had known me since boyhood and were not afraid to approach—dared to congratulate me on my newfound status as a mated male.

Fated mates were a blessing from the Moon Goddess, and some shifters spent their entire lives searching for that bond. Mine had walked, unknowingly and unwittingly, right into mine.

For the first time in my life, the Moon Goddess had granted me something good.

And I'd abandoned her in my damn bedroom.

I stalked the hallway of the second floor, spearing toward the door that I never visited more than once a month. Maybe less.

I already had the key in hand when I arrived at the door but paused at the threshold. Holding my breath, I listened for any sounds coming from within the room. Nothing.

My pulse quickened at the thought that Aria might not be inside when I open the door. Had someone taken her? Had she run away, desperate to escape a life shackled to me?

I turned the key and pushed into the room. Immediately, the delectable combination of honeysuckle and pear rolled over me, and my body relaxed. She was here.

Although darkness shrouded the room, my eyes adjusted quickly, and I found Aria curled up on the bed. She created a lump beneath the quilt, her small body occupying a mere portion of the huge mattress. Was she asleep? Without dinner?

I heard my heartbeat pounding in my ears as I took a step into the room, quietly closing the door behind me and locking it once more. I never utilized the lock before. I never cared enough about anything in my personal space.

Slowly, I walked closer to the unmoving shape. Soft, steady exhales told me that she was truly asleep, and I willed myself to memorize the rhythm of her breaths.

As I neared, her hair glimmered a shade lighter in the moonlight that pooled in from the open curtains. It illuminated her delicate features. I studied her from the foot of the bed, not daring to take a step closer for fear that she might wake up and find me

staring at her.

She possessed a dainty nose with a round tip, dusted in light freckles. Her lashes were surprisingly dark given her blonde hair and light skin tone, resting peacefully on high cheekbones. In her sleep, her lips took on a pucker, leaving the smallest gap between each full petal.

Beautiful. My own mouth parted at the sight.

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What had I done to deserve such pure, unadulterated beauty? Or, more likely, what had I done to be condemned to a creature like me?

I swallowed my awe but didn't dare to look away. I half believed she would disappear if I took my eyes off of her for one second.

I could've stayed there all night, but Aria suddenly shifted in her sleep. A soft mewl escaped her lips as she readjusted her head on the pillow, and the gray quilt slipped off of her bare shoulder.

Bare shoulder.

Every muscle in my body tightened at the realization.

She'd taken off her blouse. A single nude strap graced her shoulder, and my eyes dipped to the small cleavage now on display. Modest breasts pushed against the confines of her plain bra. Perfect mounds that would be dwarfed by my hands, yet fit like puzzle pieces in my palms. Some shameful part of me wondered if her nipples held the same rosy hue as her lips...

Hells. Had she taken off her jeans, too?

My cock unwittingly twitched, and I ripped my eyes away from Aria before the crackling embers in my blood transformed into a wildfire.

Running a hand through my long, unkempt hair, I paced away from the bed and internally cursed.

I'd never invited a woman into my bed before. Had never wanted to welcome that sort of trust and intimacy into my life. But my little dove had invited herself, stripped down into near nothingness and fallen asleep. She placed a startling amount of trust in me. In my self-control.

I didn't like it.

It was easier when others feared me. Fear was expected. Known. It allowed me to control and maintain a proper distance between myself and others in my life, even those that I considered myself closest with. I'd grown accustomed to being alone and preferred it that way.

But blind trust and acceptance... Those were foreign concepts in my life. And they promised a loss of control.

I rubbed at my forehead, fingers massaging the ruined scar tissue above my eyebrow, and cast one last look at my stunning mate. I'd be damned if I lost her, but I also felt the need to keep her an arms length away. For her sake and my own.

Aria Knox might've been my fated mate, but I wouldn't be responsible for ruining her. I was a blight to her beauty.

And yet, after I headed into the en suite bathroom and took a shower, I climbed into bed beside her for the first time. She was turned away from me, and, damn it to hell, I hated the distance between our bodies.

With painstakingly slow movements, I scooted an inch closer to the center of the bed. Then another, the mattress shifting beneath my immense weight. Finally, I dared to extend my arm and wrap it around her waist, and heat flared where my forearm secured purchase against the soft swell of her lower belly.

Although I'd never done this with anyone before, I followed my body's base instincts. I wanted to hold her close. Needed to hold her close.

So, I tugged her backwards and only stopped when her back pressed flush against my chest, her hips aligned with the curve of my pelvis. My cock, which I'd managed to tame during my time in the shower, pulsed with renewed desire as it nestled between the two globes of her ass.

Resisting the urge to grind against her, I ground my teeth instead and buried my head in the crook of her neck, inhaling her scent deep into my lungs. I draped one leg over hers, fully entangling our forms, and finally felt close enough.

At long last, I closed my eyes.

5

ARIA

Heat. Enticing, all-consuming heat cocooned my body, and I never wanted to leave.

A small sigh of contentment escaped my lips, and I shifted to snuggle closer to the big furnace wrapped around me. Its hold around my body tightened, like a boa constricting around my waist, and I tensed.

My eyes popped open, and momentary fear clamped down on my throat as, through the darkness, I saw a tan, brawny arm secured tight around my middle. My spine went straight, and I sucked in a sharp breath.

There was a man in my bed. There was a man in my bed!

No, I thought. Not my bed.

The events of the previous day crashed over me at the same moment that sweet tobacco leaf and mint infiltrated my lungs. My racing heart calmed in the slightest as I realized that Malik must've slipped into bed beside me while I slept, but every muscle in my body remained stiff.

I tried to remember his return. The night before, I only intended to rest my eyes while I waited for Malik and hadn't wanted to dirty the sheets by wearing my jeans and blouse to bed. I must've severely underestimated my exhaustion. At the moment, I could only recall dreams of warmth.

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With wide eyes, I did a mental scan of my body. As far as I could tell, my bra and panties remained untouched, and I nearly shuddered with relief.

Malik's arm tucked me in the curve of him, both of us lying on our sides. Our hips aligned, and every inch of my spine plastered against the pillowy muscles of his chest and abdomen. Coarse hair tickled my shoulders. One of his thighs parted my legs, coming to rest between them and pressing into my center.

Despite his scorching skin, I shivered.

I should've been horrified by the intimacy of our position. Should've been angered that he pulled me so close while I slept, but I couldn't bring myself to feel anything beyond pleasant surprise and fascination.

And the unfamiliar churning of liquid warmth at the very core of my being.

I tried to clamp my thighs together at the strange sensation, only to realize too late that my mate's femur still rested firm between them. I gasped as pleasure tingled from the spot where his sweatpants-clad leg rubbed against my panties.

Oh, I nearly moaned out loud but managed to hold back the embarrassing noise by biting into my bottom lip. Hard.

Although the friction offered me momentary relief, its aftereffects only increased the delicious ache tenfold. I swore I felt my heartbeat pulse at my sex, urging me to seek relief again with every fluttering beat.

I clamped my eyes shut and banned the sinful suggestion from my mind. Instead, I tried squirming away from his heavy arm, hopeful that a bit of distance between our bodies might cool the tantalizing burn in my blood.

Only, his arm was very heavy. I barely gained an inch of separation between his front and my back, but my movement did accomplish something.

Something hard and startlingly big pressed into my lower back, right between the dimples at the base of my spine. Another wiggle and it somehow became even harder and more prominent. Curious, I almost did it again.

Then, Malik's big body shifted behind mine, a deep huff of air pushed out of his lungs, and I almost yelped.

Oh Goddess, please don't wake up! I chanted my silent prayer as my cheeks heated to their melting point. Willing every muscle in my body to go deathly still, I closed my eyes and held my breath.

Malik's hold on my waist loosened in the slightest, and he immediately jerked his hips backward, as if I'd caused him physical pain with my careless movements. He peeled his chest away next, and the mattress lifted as he removed himself from the bed.

Instant regret seized my heart, and my body mourned the loss of his heat and secure hold.

Heavy footsteps traveled across the wooden floors toward the bathroom, but I refused to even open my eyes until the door closed behind him. With the soft click, I propped myself up on my elbow and glanced around the room. It was still dark outside, and the little clock on the nightstand read 4:46 AM. Sitting up a bit more, I pulled the silky sheets up on my body, covering my chest as my gaze swept to the empty space on the

mattress beside me.

The indentation of Malik's body remained, and, when I pressed my palm to the imprint, his warmth lingered, too.

The shower started running within the bathroom, and I stared at the crack of light beneath the door. His shadow moved across the tile until it eventually traveled beyond my sight.

Had I hurt him with my...wiggling? What if I angered him? Or—oh, Moon Goddess—had he been able to scent my arousal?

I groaned, burying my head in my hands and wishing that I could take back the last five minutes. If I was braver, I wouldn't have pretended to sleep when I sensed that he was waking up. I would've faced him, head on. We could have communicated, albeit, with a bit of difficulty, but it would've been better than this.

Embarrassed, I tossed myself back on the pillow once more and imagined how I would possibly face Malik when he exited the bathroom again. I should apologize. Or, perhaps it would be better to pretend that nothing happened? Fake sleep once more?

By the time I heard the shower turn off, my head spun from all of my conflicting plans to mend the situation. I flipped onto my side and watched his shadow move beneath the door again.

When the handle turned, I panicked.

MALIK

Aria was awake, even though she tried her damndest to convince me otherwise.

As soon as I walked out of the bathroom, a towel secured low on my hips, I heard her breath hitch. Then, her inhales turned rigid and fake, like a machine manually expanding her lungs. She curled in on herself, facing the bathroom door now as if she couldn't stop herself from monitoring my movements when I left the bed. She didn't trust me.

I frowned and turned away from her faux-sleeping form, moving into the closet to fetch clothes.

Grappling with one of the few pairs of jeans that I kept in this room, I ground my teeth and cursed my foolishness.

I shouldn't have allowed myself to touch her last night. Shouldn't have held her in my arms.

I'd crossed a boundary that my little dove wasn't comfortable with. Why else would she have been squirming against my embrace? She was horrified of me and wanted to escape, no doubt.

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And, like a fucking monster, I'd woken up with a raging hard-on.

As soon as I realized it, I shot out of bed, but guilt still gnawed at my gut. I'd always prided myself on my self-control, but with Aria, my fated mate... Well, I had to fuck my own hand in the showertwicebefore my cock calmed down.

With my jeans hanging unbuttoned on my hips, I rubbed at the ugly, jagged scar that tainted my neck from ear to ear and sighed.

I hated it.

If I didn't have this scar, I could've walked out of the closet, sat on the edge of the bed, and spoken to Aria. Could've apologized for scaring her and promised not to do it again. I could've explained my plans to move her out of my brother's pack house and into my home, where she'd be safe and free and mine.

Instead, I was hiding in the closet. Silent. Forced to communicate with her using a fucking notepad.

Clenching my jaw to the point of pain, I grabbed the first gray t-shirt from my meager stack and slid it over my torso. The fabric fit a bit too snug, unsurprising considering I hadn't restocked this closet in the five years since I decided to keep a spare handful of clothing in it for scenarios like this. It seemed I'd grown in size and musculature since then.

Dressed, I pushed open the closet door once more and, despite the darkness shrouding the room, saw my little mate stiffen at my presence.

Swallowing my disappointment, I hardened myself against her disgust and walked toward the nightstand, where the notepad still waited from last night. Pen in hand, I flipped to the next open page and glared at the empty space.

For a moment, I contemplated scrawling another hasty message, demanding that Aria wait in the bedroom and not leave until I returned later. With the tip of my pen pressed to the yellow paper, the ink began to bleed onto the sheet, but I paused.

Cold, impersonal notes wouldn't do anything to lessen Aria's fear of me.

My throat bobbed as I glanced over at her still shape on the bed, then my hand started moving of its own accord.

Little dove,

Good morning. I hope you slept well. Again, I ask that you refrain from exiting this room alone today. I'll ask a friend, Emerson, to wait outside the room at dawn. She will take you to have breakfast and help you settle into our home.

Stay with Emerson until I return tonight.

Yours,

Malik

I read and reread the note. My handwriting was piss poor, and I'd never cared enough to improve it during school. My brother needed my fighting ability, not my skills with a pen and paper. And I certainly was no poet.

Once or twice, I considered crumbling the note up and reverting to my hasty, impersonal scribbles. At least they wouldn't make me feel like a besotted idiot.

I eyed the end of my note. ‘Yours.’

Heat threatened to climb up my neck at the affection-laced farewell. Would the word upset Aria? Or would it offer a glimpse of the deep, all-consuming devotion that I’d felt for her the moment I laid eyes on her?

According to fate and the Moon Goddess and, frankly, every fiber in my body, Iwashers. And she was mine.

Eventually, I forced myself to put the notepad back on the nightstand, no longer willing to waste any more time pondering the note. Although my mind told me to make a swift exit to get an early start on my duties for the day, I found myself lingering by the edge of the bed.

Aria rested at the center of the mattress, her gold-spun hair cascading over her shoulder and across her pillow. Her breast rose and fell with each steady inhale. She was getting better at faking sleep already.

Despite myself, I reached over the mattress and brushed my knuckle against her brow where a tendril of blonde hair had fallen. The strand slipped between my index and middle finger, like silk against the calluses.

At my touch, Aria’s full dark lashes fluttered open. Eyes of vivid blue blinked up at me, and, to my surprise and confusion, there wasn’t a hint of fear in their depths.

“M-Malik?” she whispered, shifting to support her body on an elbow.

The sound of my name on her lips made my heart rate swell until it battered against my chest like a hammer.

She pushed further up on her elbow, and the sheets fell down her body to reveal her

bra and cleavage. I forced my gaze back to her face, even as heat surged through my veins.Hell.

I quickly attempted to draw my hand back, away from her face, as if it could somehow harm her through sheer proximity. Before I could successfully bring it back to my side, however, her own fingers wrapped around my hand.

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“Wait,” she pleaded, pulling my fingers back to her impossibly soft cheek and holding my palm there. She leaned into my touch, and it bewildered me. “Where are you going?”

My brows knitted together, and, for the briefest second, I opened my mouth to answer her. No sound came out, but even the attempt sent pain prickling at my vocal cords. In the years following my injury, I made the same mistake countless times a day, but it hadn’t happened in half a decade. Somehow, this newness with Aria made me forget.

I immediately clamped my lips shut once more, embarrassed by my inability to answer such a simple question. Far more roughly than I intended, I yanked my hand back to grab the notepad from the nightstand.

Her eyes widened at my harsh treatment, something like hurt pooling in the blue, and I hated myself even more.

I needed to get the hell out of that room, before that hurt transformed into something worse. Ripping my eyes away from hers, I cast the notepad on the mattress but didn’t wait for her to read it.

Instead, I turned on my heel and retreated. Just like a damn coward.

After Malik stormed out of the room, sleep evaded me. Instead, I decided to shower in an effort to find clarity amidst the turmoil in my head. I turned the water to hot and waited until steam rose to the ceiling before slipping inside.

Almost immediately, I sank onto my backside on the stone floor and hugged my knees, allowing the scalding liquid to rain down on my head and shoulders. I welcomed the burn. It distracted me from the strange tightness in my chest.

I must've read Malik's note a hundred times after he left, memorizing its contents and the way he'd scrawled the letters across the paper. The note...confused me.

It hinted at affection, with his use of the endearment 'little dove' and the words 'our home.' Something in my stomach fluttered at the way he'd signed the note, 'Yours, Malik.'

Yours. Did he mean that?

Moon Goddess, I didn't know. Because his actions starkly contrasted the note's warmth. He'd snatched his hand away from me, as if he couldn't stand the thought of touching me. Then, without another word, he'd stalked out of the room like I'd angered him.

Had I angered him? I cradled my head in my hands, letting my wet hair fall in front of my face. I groaned in frustration, even while I blinked back tears that stung my eyes.

It wasn't supposed to be like this.

After sitting on the floor of the shower for several minutes longer, I forced myself to rise and step into the drafty bathroom to dry off. Rather than snoop through the drawers and cabinets for a fresh towel, I grabbed Malik's towel off the nearest hook.

With water still dripping in rivers down my naked body, I brought the towel to my nose and inhaled a shaky breath. There, mingled with the smell of soap and dampness, was his scent. Tobacco leaf and mint and something else... Something that made my blood warm and seep directly to the spot between my legs.

Oh hells. I closed my eyes and recalled the feeling of him pressing into my lower back, nestled between the globes of my backside.

As soon as he woke up, he'd jerked away from me and retreated to the bathroom to shower, but my heightened senses could still scent the evidence of his arousal—his need—on this towel, even after he'd gone.

He desired me, that much was clear. Satisfaction curled in my stomach at the knowledge. At least his body recognized our bond.

I dried off, hoping that hints of my mate's scent would linger on my body throughout the rest of the day. With newfound hope in my steps, I left the bathroom in search of fresh clothes to wear. Unfortunately, I could only find spare t-shirts in the closet. The accompanying men's jeans would've fallen off of my body, so I opted to wear my same pants as yesterday in combination with one of Malik's shirts.

The fabric hung off of my body like a potato sack, hiding any good feature I possessed. The t-shirt's hem reached the middle of my thigh, and the collar sagged below my clavicle. I'd need to get in contact with my father, both to check in on him and to ask him to send me a few boxes of clothes...

By the time I finished dressing, the first rays of dawn started to leak through the window. I combed my fingers hastily through my damp hair before approaching the door.

Malik's note had promised that his friend, Emerson, would be waiting for me. A part

of me doubted that she'd already be there, but when I dared to crack open the door, a young woman stood with her hands clasped in front of her, a pleasant smile gracing her lips.

"Good morning," she chirped, her smile widening.

She had a slightly crooked front tooth and a smattering of freckles across her pretty face, and auburn hair fell straight to her breasts. She couldn't have been much older than me, in her mid-twenties at the most.

"Emerson?" I wondered, peering a bit further beyond the heavy door. I'd nearly forgotten how dark and, frankly, medieval the hallways were.

She responded with an eager nod. "And you're Aria. Malik told me to stay with you until he returns from training."

Training. So that was where he'd run off to.

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“That’s what he told me, too.” I gave her a small smile and stepped out of the bedroom.

Emerson instinctively stepped backward in response, as if repelled like a magnet. I frowned and allowed my gaze to sweep over the rest of her body in quick analysis. Her collarbones protruded and her cheekbones stood out a bit more than was natural. Whereas every shifter I’d seen since arriving at the Intonat Noctecompound exuded strength and power, Emerson appeared frail by comparison.

She’s an omega. I blinked back my surprise.

Growing up in my father’s pack, we didn’t have any omegas. With such a small pack, our roles were limited, and excessive rankings weren’t necessary. We survived without the ruthless hierarchy that many larger packs utilized and relied upon.

I bit my lip, discomfort churning in my stomach at her natural submission. I didn’t want anyone to have to act that way around me.

Immediately, I offered Emerson my widest smile. “He also told me you’re a friend, and I could use one of those right now.”

Her cheeks reddened, making her freckles turn a shade darker. “The General has always been very kind,” she responded, quieter than before.

My brow furrowed. “General?”

She nodded once, a small dip of her chin. “Alpha Roman’s enforcer. Whereas Roman

makes every decision, Malik executes them.”

Enforcer. A shiver skittered down my spine at the insinuation of that word. It reeked of bloodshed and violence. We definitely didn’t have those at home. In fact, my father never really needed to enforce his rules or dominance. If he did, I was certain he’d do it himself and not dole it out to another male or female.

It seemed I had much to learn about life in the In-tonat Nocte Pack... Something like unease skittered down my spine at the prospect of it all.

Down the hall, a door opened and footsteps sounded, and Emerson stiffened.

“We should get going now,” she murmured, ducking her head before turning on her heel and spearing toward the same staircase that Malik led me up the day before.

I hurried to follow her, glancing one last time down the hallway behind us, where another woman left a room and walked, thank the Moon Goddess, in the other direction. Judging by Emerson’s reaction, I didn’t want to encounter another pack member this morning.

“Uh,” I practically jogged to catch up to her. “Where are we going? To Malik’s house?” To eat, I hoped.

A small nod, but Emerson kept her eyes ahead. “The other pack members will be far less inclined to bother you there. As it stands, you’ve made quite a splash. Everyone wants to see the female that the General snatched from beneath the Alpha’s nose.”

I resisted the urge to flinch at the memory. The wrongness of Alpha Roman’s closeness. My father’s decision to offer me to the brute for the sole purpose of breeding with him. Finding my fated mate had numbed the sharp sting of betrayal, but the pain was still there, deep and waiting to be processed.

Another time, I decided, pushing the ache down again. I'll ponder my father's betrayal later. Maybe in a therapy session. Do they even have therapists in this pack? I added that to my ever-growing list of questions.

"I was never Alpha Roman's to begin with, so Malik didn't snatch me away from him," I muttered, scrunching my nose at the primitive narrative.

We reached the bottom of the stairs and booked it toward the main foyer. If I took a deep enough breath, I could still smell traces of my father's scent lingering in the air. It comforted me and pained me, all at once.

So far, we hadn't passed anyone in the halls, but I wondered if that would change once we stepped outside. I glanced sideways at Emerson, who wore her unease like a cloak.

"Emerson, are we... in danger or something?" I asked as we approached the door.

"Danger?" she echoed and quickly shook her head. "No. No one would dare to hurt you. Malik wouldn't have left you if that wasn't the case."

I didn't quite believe her. I'd heard enough stories about the beasts in the In-tonat Nocte Pack to know that they were an unforgiving, bloodthirsty group. And, although there was a biological, chemical connection binding me to Malik, no affection or emotion cemented that bond. Why else would he have treated me so coldly?

I frowned. "Then why are we sneaking around like a pair of thieves?"

She paused with her hand on the doorknob and gnawed on her bottom lip.

"Alpha Roman was not happy about the turn of events yesterday. Even he wouldn't dare to harm you or infringe upon your fated mate bond, but..." She lowered her

voice, and her eyes took on a silver gleam. “He’s not the sort to let bygones be bygones.”

She spoke as if she had experience—intimateexperience—with Roman’s inability to let matters go. Pity swelled in my stomach. I couldn’t imagine what she might’ve endured as an omega at the hands of the elite, with Roman as the ringleader.

“Let’s hurry up and get to Malik’s house then,” I offered, unwilling to embarrass her by asking her to explain further. “I’d be happy not to run into Roman again for at least a fortnight.”

One corner of Emerson’s lips curled in a smile that didn’t come close to reaching her eyes, but she seemed grateful for my willingness to believe her.

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The sun still hadn't crept over the horizon, but a brightening shade of blue smeared across the sky. Dew coated the grass, and a light breeze ran its fingers across my forearms. I inhaled deep, unknowingly searching for a familiar, intoxicating scent in the morning air.

Disappointment pricked at my chest when I found no trace of Malik.

We followed a path away from the monstrous pack house and toward a tree line, where I could just make out shingle roofs cresting above the evergreens.

"Is Malik nearby?" I questioned, feigning casual curiosity. In truth, I burned to know where I might find him.

Emerson shook her head, and I pretended that the gesture didn't feel like a knife to the gut. "Alpha ordered him to take the latest training class on a patrol to test their?—"

"Emerson!" A loud male voice barked from behind us.

My red-haired guide came to an immediate halt, and every muscle in her body went rigid. Fear radiated off of her in waves, clogging the air with the scent of her submission.

I spun on my heel to face this newcomer, and momentary relief swept through me when I realized that Roman hadn't tracked us down. That relief was short-lived, though. I recognized him as one of the males that flanked Roman in the outdated throne room yesterday evening. He had the blonde hair and broad shoulders of a

magazine model.

“Anders,” Emerson bowed as she spoke, her voice trembling in the slightest. “Can I help you?”

He sneered at her, as if disgusted by her display of servitude. Of course, if she dared lift her voice or raise her head, he’d undoubtedly strike her down for her insolence. My old pack might not have engaged in the practice of a strict, harsh hierarchy, but I’d heard enough stories about the tragic lives of omegas.

“You can tell me why you’re running off with our newest arrival,” he ordered. Thank the Moon Goddess he turned his attention away from Emerson and now stared solely at me.

His pale blue eyes flickered down my body, and I thought I saw his nostrils expand. Then, a small, smug smirk distorted his features.

Bile crept up my throat.

“The General—” Emerson began to explain herself, but he interrupted her immediately.

“Does not matter,” Anders drawled. “Alpha Roman has demanded that this female be brought to him. Immediately.”

Anger and fear sparked inside of me. My hands curled into fists as I fought to control my breathing. My instincts told me to run.

“I can’t imagine what he wants with me,” I challenged, although my voice betrayed me with a faint wobble. I took a small step forward to put myself between Anders and Emerson.

Again, Anders' nostrils flared. "Perhaps not. But he is your alpha. Best not to get on his bad side on your first day in the pack. Or should I tell him you disobeyed his order?"

I felt Emerson tremble at my back and knew that there was only one way this would end. I had to go to Alpha Roman or risk incurring his wrath on myself or, even worse, Emerson. I wouldn't do that to her, no matter that we'd only just met.

"Fine, I'll go with you," I whispered, swallowing the lump in my throat. Mustering courage that I didn't know I possessed, I glanced over my shoulder and offered my new friend a small, encouraging smile. "Emerson, why don't I just meet you later?"

She immediately opened her mouth to argue, clearly unwilling to leave me to the wolves—literally—but I held her gaze pleadingly.

Go, I wanted to beg.

From what she told me, Roman wouldn't risk harming me. I was his brother's mate, after all. Emerson, on the other hand... She wouldn't be safe.

Sensing my reasoning, she ducked her head and nodded. "I'll see you later then, Aria."

Reluctance dripped from her every word, but I turned my attention back to Anders and forced my chin high. I wouldn't bend to this male, even though he emitted waves of authority and power. One of Alpha Roman's betas, perhaps?

I didn't like the way Anders looked at me. There was a wicked gleam in his pale blue eyes, like I was prey, and a sudden wave of homesickness unraveled in my belly.

I wanted to go home, to my father and my pack. To my quiet, safe life.

Anders led the way back toward the castle, leaving me to trail a few steps behind. I wrapped my arms around my waist and prayed that Emerson had contacted Malik to let him know about the situation.

Maybe he would come back to steal me away from his brother again? Or, maybe he didn't care. He was doing his job, training the pack, after all.

I released a shaky breath and told myself that it would be fine. I'd survive. No one would hurt me.

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To my surprise, we walked straight past the castle. I frowned, on-edge now that we were entering unknown territory. “Where are you taking me?”

“Training grounds” he answered, turning his head back to flash me a shark’s grin, wicked and hungry.

My heart stuttered to a halt, and the blood drained from my face.

“The Alpha wants to see you fight.”

7

ARIA

I could fight.

Of course, I could fight. But that didn’t mean I was particularly good at it.

As the daughter of an alpha, I had more strength and athletic-prowess than most females in my class back home. For the first twelve years of my life, I excelled physically. I could’ve easily become one of the best warriors in the pack.

And yet, the violence and physicality... They felt wrong.

I didn’t want to fight. I didn’t want to cause pain. It disagreed with the very center of my being—the basic fibers that bound my blood and bone.

So, when I turned thirteen, I asked my father for another path. He'd offered me a gentle smile, the corners of his eyes wrinkling as he pressed a kiss to my forehead, and escorted me to the infirmary. From that day on, I honed a different sort of expertise. Healing.

I'd apprenticed under our pack's doctor and learned by healing small wounds, conducting routine check-ups on the ill and injured, and studying his medical books. Every day, I'd thrown myself into this peaceful practice, honing my mind rather than my muscles.

I tried explaining this to Anders as he led me to the training field, but my words fell on deaf ears.

"Moon Goddess," I sighed in exasperation, racing to keep up with his long strides. "Will you please listen to me? I'm not trained as a warrior. Not really. Your alpha will only—"

My words dried up as we rounded a corner and arrived at a well-organized outdoor training facility. A dozen wolves stood around various fighting rings, some engaged in active brawls or receiving instruction from superiors. And, standing at the center of the action, Alpha Roman observed his pack with hard eyes.

Those eyes snapped toward me, and my heart lurched uncomfortably into my throat. He wielded a wicked grin.

My feet stumbled to a halt, every instinct warning me to turn heel and run.

Anders prodded me forward with a rough shove. "Hurry up."

With the blonde muscle at my back, I had no choice but to step closer to the center of the training facility. Somehow, I forced myself to hold Roman's gaze with every step.

By traditional standards, any woman would've considered him handsome. With an impeccably groomed, dark crown atop his head and chiseled features, he stood with the confidence of a man accustomed to stealing the gaze of every woman and man in a room. And yet...

With every step I drew nearer, my body recoiled.

To continue onward, I found myself conjuring fleeting memories of Malik's face instead. Even just the thought of his strong features, concealed under a thick, short beard and marred by three scars, was enough to make my heart palpate with renewed vigor. I remembered the intense warmth that spread across my skin where his fingers clasped my own, and it gave me strength.

This is Malik's brother, I reminded myself as I arrived in front of Roman. He won't hurt you.

Roman towered over me, yet, after spending the night tucked against my colossal-sized mate, he didn't seem all that large. Innate dominance pulsed off of him in waves, appealing to my natural inclination to serve an alpha. I fought it, holding his gaze.

He stepped forward, and I knew what he wanted from me. Without a word, he demanded submission.

I ground my teeth together. The satisfied gleam in Roman's eyes made me keen to resist the unspoken order, and I realized with startling clarity that I could withstand the urge to show deference to this man.

Confusion muddled my brain. Yes, Roman exuded enough power that I felt drawn to obey him, as was sown into my biology. But... An alpha's authority should've been impossible to ignore.

I blinked. How could I resist him?

A low growl rumbled from behind me, snapping me from my thoughts. Anders. “Bow before your alpha, she-wolf.”

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At last, I tore my gaze from Roman's and glared at the dirt. For some reason, every bone in my body protested as I dipped my head in a small, subtle display of respect. Despite my body's strange resistance to him, Roman was still the Intonat Nocte Pack alpha. Further resistance would only cause problems for me—or Malik.

With my concession, Roman finally deigned to speak. "I'm pleased to see you healthy and unscathed this morning, Aria."

My eyebrows scrunched together, stomach twisting at the insinuation of his snide words. As if he'd expected Malik to harm me the night before... Irrational fear and disgust churned in my chest, at once afraid and irritated by his assumption.

Malik wouldn't hurt me.

"You wanted to see me fight?" I questioned, hoping to steer the conversation away from my fated mate. I didn't need to disclose anything about my relationship with his brother.

A flash of white teeth. "Yes. Every new pack member must be tested before being sorted into units. As my brother's mate, I thought I'd personally oversee your testing."

"How thoughtful of you," I bit back, too quick. Too confrontational. Roman's gaze flickered with poorly veiled anger, and I swallowed before continuing in a hurry.

"But I'm afraid you've wasted your time. I've been training as a healer and nurse for the last seven years," I announced, my hands balled into fists at my sides to control

their shaking. “I’d be much better suited in your infirmary, assisting a doctor or—”

“Okay.”

“Okay?” I echoed, blinking away my surprise.

One corner of Roman’s lips curled in a barely-there smile, and I could hardly believe my ears.

“If you believe you’d be better suited in a position with the pack doctors, I won’t force you to fight.” He waved his hand, still wearing that easy smirk. “I’ll tell our lead nurse, Estelle, to expect you tomorrow.”

“I—” My mouth hung open for one long moment before I corrected myself. “Thank you.”

Maybe I read Alpha Roman wrong? Perhaps he wasn’t quite the heartless, unworthy male I first deemed him to be.

“You’re welcome,” he replied, his voice smooth like honey.

We stared at each other for one long moment. Then another. I felt the eyes of the surrounding pack members weighing heavy on us and Anders hovering suspiciously close to my back. Even so, I kept my gaze on Roman.

Willing myself to forget the way he’d spoken to me the evening prior, when he’d stared at me with unashamed desire and proclaimed his intent to breed me for an heir, I forced a small smile on my lips. “Well... If that’s all?—”

“Not quite.”

And, just like that, those two clipped words snuffed the hope from my heart. I didn't dare to breathe.

"There's the matter of your scent," Roman drawled, casual, as if he was discussing a simple matter of business with his second-in-command.

"My scent?" I echoed, eyeing him dubiously.

He took a step forward, and, like a repelling magnet, I took a step back, only to brush against Anders' front. Cornered.

"It appears my brother failed to perform his duty last night." He gave a low, deriding chuckle that made my blood warm in anger and embarrassment. My cheeks flushed as I felt the eye of every shifter land on my neck, bare and unclaimed. "You continue to carry your old pack's scent."

"I don't see how that is anyone's business," I countered, although I failed to hold Roman's gaze. My eyes found my feet, and my hands curled into tight fists, fingernails biting into my palm.

"As your alpha," he hummed, and I felt the vibration of his words in my bones. "It is my business."

He prowled ever closer, his feet coming to a halt directly in front of mine, but I didn't dare look up. Every instinct urged me to run.

"You're a member of the Intonat Noctenow. Carrying our scent—my scent—is a matter of protection. No one dares to touch what is mine." His hot breath fanned against the side of my cheek.

I knew if I lifted my head, I'd find him bearing down on me, our faces inches apart, so

I kept myself bowed. It was clear what Alpha Roman wanted. He wanted to give me his scent.

“I-I won’t leave Malik’s home. I won’t be in any danger there, so it won’t matter whether I have my old scent.” I tried reasoning with him, shaking my head. “I won’t leave until I’ve been initiated with the rest of my old pack.”

Then, with a touch that sent spindles of ice shooting down my spine, his big fingers grasped my chin and pulled my head up. Just as I anticipated, mere inches separated his body from mine. I tried to lean back, but Anders’ unrelenting form pressed into my back, holding me in place.

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“The initiation won’t take place for weeks. It is my duty to protect you. To mark you for the Intonat Nocte,” Roman whispered with nausea-inducing tenderness.

I started to tremble but mustered my strength. A muscle in my jaw clenched. “Only Malik can mark me. As my fated mate. Only him.”

“Only Malik can give you a true mark, yes,” Roman agreed, stroking my cheek and jaw, then down to my neck. “But there are other ways to give you my scent.”

He closed the distance between us. I immediately tried to retreat, but Anders clamped his arms around mine like a steel chain. Even if I thrashed, I couldn’t move.

With rough, impossibly strong hands, Roman took a fistful of hair at the back of my neck and tilted my head to the side, exposing the column of my neck to him.

“I won’t hurt you, Aria,” he soothed, his lips brushing the thin skin just above my clavicle.

I clamped my eyes shut, a whimper slipping from my lips as I prepared for the inevitable. My only consolation was that he wouldn’t truly mark me. Like he said, he was merely protecting me by giving me his scent...

Surrounded by an audience, Roman’s mouth sealed over my lower neck. His lips curled over his teeth, protecting me from his punishing canines, but his tongue lapped at my skin. Thorough. Wet.

Complete and utter wrongness consumed my body, and his tongue stroked up the

column of my neck. Tears stung the surface of my eyes, but I wouldn't cry. I would bear it. It would be over soon and I would carry the Intonat Nocte Pack's scent.

Moon Goddess help me, I pleaded, squeezing my eyes together.

Then, Roman's grip on my hair tightened. A low, grumbling groan vibrated from his chest, and his lips peeled back. His canines dared to scrape against the sensitive skin at the base of my throat. No.

And then I sensed it.

Thundering paws. A dangerous, electrifying tension settling over the clearing. And, finally, a growl, so low and menacing that it could've been pulled from the pits of hell itself.

8

MALIK

I saw red.

Crimson blood edged my vision, every instinct urging me to tear into the male in front of me, brother and alpha. To clamp my jaws around his jugular and thrash until his tongue—the same tongue that lapped at my little mate's neck—hung from my jowls.

The male, still in his human form, had the sense to step away from what was mine. She—Aria, mine—scurried backward, clutching at her throat as if he'd branded her with fire.

A new savage snarl ripped from my chest. My wolf's vocal cords weren't similarly

ruined beyond repair.

I prowled forward, paws heavy against the soft dirt of the training grounds, and strategically positioned myself between the alpha and my female. My movements were pure animal, the human parts of my mind hidden beneath the fog of rage.

The male—no, my kin—still did not shift into his own beast. I'd kill him anyway.

Nearby, several lesser wolves snarled and growled warnings at me, but they didn't attack. Not yet. They would wait for his signal. I didn't care. I'd kill him first then happily kill the rest of them. I knew that I could. For her, I would...

A familiar voice streamed into my head, piercing through the savage veil. Brother, what are you doing here? You've abandoned your training duties?

I snapped my jaws at him, inching closer to the ground to prepare to strike. I couldn't think of a sensible response. That part of my mind had gone dormant the moment I felt my little dove's fear spike through our bond.

I'd been overseeing a patrol of young warriors when it happened. A spindling of ice shot straight into my heart, turning the rest of my body cold. I abandoned my post in an instant, but I was too far away. There was too much distance...

I felt her revulsion. Experienced her dread as if it was my own.

And, when I crested the hill, flanks heaving and blood pumping, I saw it. My Aria held against her will in front of a host of *Intonat Nocte*. My brother's mouth at her neck, latched onto her sensitive skin. Marking her with his scent.

My control snapped.

Roman took the smallest step backward, but his lips pulled back in an easy smirk.

Malik. He used my name, calling to the man within the monster. You didn't need to come.

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Another growl rumbled from the pits of my beast. I stepped closer, and my brother had the sense to look wary.

Behind me, one of his betas shifted, and the sound of ripping fabric filled the clearing. A low, warning snarl rattled from the male's jaws, and I recognized the animalistic sound as belonging to Anders. If I took another step toward our alpha, he'd attack.

Let him attack, I thought.

You are angry with me for protecting your mate? For giving her my scent—the pack's scent—when you would not? He laughed through our mind-link, and his outward expression matched. Arrogant eyes. A wicked smirk. If you'd done your job and fucked her, we wouldn't be in this mess.

Red flared at the edges of my vision again at the mere fact that another male used that word in connection to Aria, and my claws sank into the damp earth, muscles bunching together to launch...

And yet, in the same instance, something like shame squeezed at my chest, grounding me. One second passed, then another, and my anger dwindled alongside my pride.

Was Roman right? Had I failed Aria by refusing to mark her? At the time, I'd thought I was doing her a service. I wanted to spare her.

And now, my brother had stepped in to fulfill where I had failed. Just as he always did.

My hackles fell, and I took a small step backward.

“That’s right,” Roman soothed, speaking as though he’d just tamed a terrible creature.

I hated it. The condescension. The superiority. The fact that he spoke out loud for all to hear.

“You know better than to raise a hand to me,” he continued, smug.

But I did know better. He’d hounded the truth into me more times than I could count. Before our father died, he’d warned Roman against letting me live.

I was twenty two. Roman was eighteen. Since the attack, it had been ingrained in me that I was unworthy to lead the pack. I knew where I belonged, but our father wanted me dead nonetheless. Father offered to kill me himself, if it meant securing Roman’s rule of the In-tonat Nocte Pack, but my brother refused.

Roman saved me. He gave me purpose. Molded me into a weapon where the rest of the world saw me as a monster.

I owed him my life. But I did not owe him Aria.

She is mine, I warned, finding my words at last.

He cocked a brow and nodded to a spot over my shoulder, where I knew Aria stood. “Then claim her, brother.”

The hair lining my wolf’s spine bristled, but I managed to spin away from my brother. With the brash movement, I glared at the onlookers with bared teeth, and most of my pack members took a handful of steps backward and averted their eyes.

To them, I was the monster my brother painted me as.

When my gaze landed on Aria, my anger sparked anew.

She stared at my wolf with wide eyes, her alarm evident in the way she retreated a small step as I neared. From the time I reached maturity, my gray and brindle-coated wolf towered above other males in the pack. Even Roman could not match my size and mass. I was accustomed to the fear, but I detested seeing it in her brilliant blues.

I inhaled deeply, catching notes of her honeysuckle and pear scent that aroused every nerve-ending in my body. My blood warmed, but it started to boil when I smelt it.

Him.

Roman's mark. His saliva slathered overtop her pulse point, coating the spot where the blood pumped so close to the surface of her skin.

A dangerous cocktail of adrenaline and rage simmered in my veins, pumping to parts of my lupine body that wanted—needed—to rectify this situation. Every primal urge demanded that I claim my mate, regardless of the audience or her needs. Sink my canines into her neck and wash over any trace of Roman on her skin, then fill her to the brim with my seed. It would be rough. Dominating.

If she was in her wolf form, I didn't know if I would've been able to resist it.

But, as I prowled closer to her and she blinked up at me with her humansmallness, I held onto my control with a vice-like grip.

When I reached her, I huffed and nudged at her shoulder with my snout, a silent command for her to turn and follow me. I wanted her away from the clearing. Away from Roman.

She obeyed immediately, speed-walking from the training ground as if she couldn't move fast enough. I prowled a few paces behind, slinking at a slow pace so she always remained a step ahead of me, my body constantly between her and Roman. Shielding her.

Several minutes passed in silence, only the sounds of our footsteps and Aria's heavy breathing surrounding us. Eventually, with a safe distance separating us from the training grounds, she slowed.

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“Malik,” she whispered, her gait faltering as she turned to look over her shoulder.

I paused, claws curling into the dirt and eyes hard. Another breeze ruffled her blonde strands, and honeysuckle, pear, and Roman swept inside my nostrils. Anger simmered in my center.

“I-I’m so sorry,” she began, shaking her head. “Alpha Roman told me... He said I was in danger. I didn’t want him to mark me like that.”

Don’t apologize. You did nothing wrong, I wanted to say. But I couldn’t.

And, even if I could’ve spoken those words aloud, I wasn’t sure if I would. Deep down, I knew Aria was not at fault, but the territorial, primal parts of myself felt betrayed. My traitorous mind replayed the sight of her slender neck on display, offered to my brother. Pliant and willing for another male. And I wondered if she wished that fate had bound her to him instead.

I huffed a sharp exhale, the only semblance of a response I could manage, and nudged her forward again. I wanted to escort her to my cottage, where she’d be safe and hidden within its walls.

Her throat bobbed once, but she turned her head and continued plodding toward the forest, where the private residences waited.

When we arrived at the cottage, a quaint stone structure with ivy adorning the facade, several minutes later, I directed Aria to the front door and waited until she entered before digging deep into myself and searching for the kernel of humanity. I internally

tugged on it, immersing myself in it until the shift began. My limbs stretched, bones popping and cracking as fur turned into skin, and the beast morphed into an entirely different kind of monster.

I hadn't wasted time retrieving my clothing from the pack's designated out-building, so I had nothing to cover myself with. I stood, utterly naked, just beyond my home's front door.

Nudity never bothered me. Growing up amongst shifters, I grew accustomed to baring myself to others and having others bare themselves to me. And I never hated my naked body as much as I hated my face. Scars littered my chest and limbs. Wounds collected from nasty brawls and momentous victories, but none so ugly as the jagged deformity on my face.

And yet, as I waited at the threshold, my stomach twisted at the thought of Aria seeing me this way.

Inside the wide-open door, Aria blinked at her surroundings, her doe eyes taking in the little kitchen and breakfast nook that greeted her. Then, she slowly spun, and her eyes expanded like saucers when she beheld my body.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, immediately averting her eyes to my feet, but not before they snagged on my cock, still semi-erect from my body's natural need to claim her for myself.

Pink blush dusted her milky cheeks, and my cock twitched at the innocence of her reaction, the blood rushing to my groin anew.

Fuck. I shifted on my feet, hyper-aware of my member growing, my balls firming with a tantalizing ache. My body had never reacted like this to the gaze of a female, and heat flushed up my neck in embarrassment.

Females had stared at me before, I knew. I possessed the body of a warrior—analpha. Broad shoulders and an expansive chest, covered in a thin layer of dark hair that disappeared and reappeared again below my navel. Long legs and thick, muscled thighs. The...endowmentsof an alpha, too.

I'd never paid much attention to them. Never allowed the scent of their lust to distract me from my duty to Roman. I was certain I'd disappoint them, anyway.

And yet, watching Aria blush did things to my body that I couldn't explain.

Aria clamped her teeth down on her bottom lip, eyes still downcast, and her voice was a bit hoarse as she stepped aside. "Sorry, I'm blocking the entrance, aren't I?"

Half of my mind wanted to leave. Wanted to shift back into my wolf form until the pulsing need that stretched and tormented my cock subsided. The other half demanded that I enter the kitchen, yank Aria's jeans to her thighs, and plunge into her.

Goddess, a glistening drop leaked from the head of my arousal at the mere thought.

My cheeks flamed now. Somehow, I managed to listen to the sliver of reason in my head and entered my cottage, heavy balls swinging with every step.

I didn't stop walking, spearing directly toward the door that led to my bedroom. I felt Aria's gaze follow me the entire way, and, by the time the door closed behind me, my breaths came ragged and quick.

I ground my teeth and immediately wrapped my palm around the base of my cock. My hips jerked forward at the tight grasp, even as my body protested the roughness of my own skin. Just beyond the door, Aria would be soft. Her hands. Her mouth. Hercunt.

Clamping my eyes shut, I leaned my shoulders back against the door and resisted the urge to fist my member and imagine that it was her. I didn't have time for this.

There was only one thing that would calm the roar between my ears and the flaming in my blood. One thing that I would allow myself, because I knew I could not claim her, not truly—notfully—in this unraveled, dangerous state of mind.

So, with rigid, stiff movements, I scrounged through my dresser and pulled on the first pair of sweats I could find, ensnaring my painfully-hard cock within.

Then, I flung open the bedroom door to mark my mate.

9

ARIA

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My mind reeled. Heat scorched my neck and my cheeks.

Moments ago, Malik stormed past me and shut himself behind the sliding barn door across the room, but I still couldn't move. I felt my heartbeat in every corner and chasm of my body—thumping between my ears, pounding against my ribcage, pulsing at the apex of my thighs...

I clamped my eyes shut, and the image of my mate standing naked in the doorway played in my mind.

Malik was beautiful.

Not by the conventional standards. Not like the boys I'd entertained feelings for throughout my adolescence, with perfect hair and finely-cut, picturesque muscles.

No, Malik couldn't be compared to those boys.

He looked like a god. One of the great warriors that served the Moon Goddess—that warmed her bed and tore cities down in her name. He could've been plucked from the heavens, and I wouldn't have blinked an eye.

He reminded me of a grizzly bear in stature. The sheer size of him—allof him—should've frightened me. Instead, my blood raced with pride and possession and need.

Dark hair dusted his impossibly long legs, padded in thick muscle that stretched and shifted with each movement. In fact, muscle covered every inch of his body, from the

bulk of his shoulders to the ridges lining his torso, though his stomach possessed a natural softness, too. His muscle had been earned in battle. It was real.

And the rest of him...

I hadn't allowed myself to study the rest of him. Not like I truly wanted to.

I almost groaned at the memory of that part of him. Dark hair trailing down from his navel. A thick rod hanging half-limp from his groin, lengthening and stiffening with every passing second. A darker, bulbous head bobbing up and down as he strode past me.

A fresh wave of arousal rushed to my center, and I clenched my thighs tight.

Goddess, I'd never felt anything like it but recognized it as my body's natural response to its fated partner. I wanted more. Wanted relief for the liquid heat that pooled at my apex. But Malik was gone. Shut away behind that door, and I didn't have the courage to follow.

Then, as if summoned by my thoughts alone, the door flew open. It rattled, the walls shaking from the force.

I gasped, then my lungs stopped functioning properly as Malik prowled toward me once again. His one functioning pupil expanded, and electricity prickled down my spine. This male was a predator, far more formidable than any other I'd faced, but my gut knew he'd never hurt me.

I barely had time to register the large swell within the confines of his gray sweatpants before his hands landed on my waist. Hard. Unrelenting.

One moment, I stood in the center of his kitchen. The next, he had me hoisted up

against the white countertop, pushing my legs open to stand between them. Like instinct, my thighs parted to accommodate him, and a solid mass pressed hot against the seam of my denim. I steadied myself with my hands on the cool marble, bracing against the weight of him.

He couldn't speak, but I knew what he needed. I'd seen the disgust flicker in his gaze when he inhaled Roman's scent on my neck.

And now, he pressed close. His long, disheveled brown hair tickled my cheeks, my collarbone as he lowered his scarred face to my neck. To the same spot where his brother had sucked at my pulse and kissed my skin.

Malik inhaled, the tip of his nose brushing the hollow beneath my ear. He started trembling. Like a mountain during an earthquake, he simmered with barely controlled rage. Waiting.

I resisted the urge to shiver and tipped my head to the side instead.

"Go ahead," I whispered, acutely aware of my nipples straining against my bra. The friction only heightened the insatiable ache spreading through my center. "You have my permission. I want you to erase him."

The softest semblance of a growl rasped from his chest, so weak that I might've imagined it. Then, he moved.

One hand landed on my jaw and angled my head to the side, while the other remained on my hip and yanked me closer to the edge of the counter. The pad of his thumb was rough against my chin. His nose nuzzled down the column of my throat, his bearded jaw scratching at the sensitive skin in his path.

He inhaled again. Paused.

Guilt reared its ugly head.

“I’m sorry,” I apologized again, trembling of my own accord.

Malik stiffened. Without moving his hands, he pulled back a few inches to meet my gaze. His eyes were still hard and hungry, but a question lingered in them now as well.

“I know it smells bad,” I explained, dropping my gaze to his bare chest. Shame heated my cheeks. “Your brother’s scent on me. I’m sorry you have to endure it.”

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I didn't look up to see his reaction, but his hand pressed harder into my hip, fingertips digging into my fleshy backside. A beat of unbearable silence passed between us. Then another, and I realized I was clutching the edge of the countertop for dear life.

At last, Malik lowered his head once more. This time, however, he did not stop.

His lips parted at the base of my throat, just above the left side of my collarbone. And he kissed me there.

It was a slow, thorough caress, his tongue gliding along my pulse point for one long moment. Followed by the scraping of his teeth, gentle and tentative. Not hard enough to pierce my skin, even though a part of me craved that bite of pain.

My eyelashes fluttered closed, a sense of frightiness spilling over my body. I barely managed to swallow back a moan.

Malik lifted his head from my neck, just an inch, but I couldn't contain my whimper. A throaty, desperate sound that begged him to come back and kiss my throat again. Fortunately, he simply brushed his mouth upward, toward the hollow beneath my ear, before repeating the process on this new spot.

I exhaled my contentment as his palm moved to spread across my nape, tangling in my hair. My stomach fluttered, winding up the growing tightness beneath my navel, and I dared to rock my hips forward.

If it weren't for his solid body, I would've slipped directly off the countertop. As it was, my center rolled against the mass straining against his sweats, offering a hint of

blessed relief for the tension building there.

A hiss of air rushed past his lips, fanning my skin and sending a shiver down my vertebrae. I surprised him, it seemed, but he recovered quickly enough, rewarding me by sealing his lips over the base of my throat and sucking—hard.

My skin stung as he pulled, then nibbled, and sucked again. Overriding any trace of another male's scent. Lavishing.

Blood pounding, chest heaving, my body felt like it was on fire. I tried to squirm, desperate for a hint of friction against his solid form to quell the flame. My breasts felt heavy. My core felt tingly and slick.

I started to wonder if he felt even a quarter of this all-consuming want, but not for long.

With his head still buried against my neck, Malik's hips started to move. He rolled against me with slow, deliberate thrusts. Despite the denim and cotton separating us, his fully erect cock sent bolts to my own sex with each deep undulation.

Eyes closed, I could imagine what it might feel like without our clothing. Would he fill me with these same, long, and purposeful strokes? Slam into me, his wide hips pounding until I manage to take every inch...

Pressure built inside of me. Delicious and filthy. Desperate and greedy. It wanted more. More. More. More.

I chased the unknown, letting instinct guide my actions. Head still rolled back to give my mate full access to my neck, I met his thrusts with my own.

Ragged breaths ripped from his mouth. He bit harder on my neck, still not breaking

through my skin's barrier, but close. So close to a true mark. I readied myself for that flash of pain, even as I came dangerously close to the edge of...something.

Desperate, I clutched at his shoulders. I needed to touch him. To mark him like he marked me.

My fingers slid up his chest, nails curling into the slabs of muscle. I sought his hair, suddenly eager to run my hands through it. On their way, my hands skimmed over his neck.

Yes. Yes. Yes?—

The pads of my fingers grazed a strange, stiff lump. Malik froze.

It was like being doused by a bucket of ice water.

He wrenched away from my wandering hands. My entire body. Disoriented, I nearly fell from the countertop but managed to catch myself on the edge.

I was shivering. Cold.

When I looked up again, Malik stood several paces away. His chest heaved, and he stared at me with near pitch-black eyes. Wide. Alarmed. And his hands hovered above the jagged, ruined scar that sliced across his voice box, bisecting him from ear to ear. The same scar I'd just touched.

“Oh Goddess!” I cried, immediately sliding down from the counter. “Malik, I didn't mean to?—”

Color rose on his cheeks, but he continued to cover his scar with trembling hands. Protecting it.

I dared a step forward, but, like repelling magnets, he retreated. His eyes hardened, lips drawing into a straight line. Although he could not speak the words aloud, his expression spoke volumes. Do not touch my scars. Ever again.

My heart clenched to the point of pain, and I staggered back to the counter, bracing my hands on either side of me. I should've known. Should've been more careful. I should have asked. Hesitated.

Just as Malik hesitated before he touched me.

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The surface of my eyes prickled, and I opened my mouth to start another apology, but he had already turned away from me. Malik adjusted himself in his sweatpants as he walked toward the front door, and I didn't have the courage to stop him. If he needed space, I would give it to him.

I stayed in the kitchen long after my mate left, staring at nothingness and wondering how the situation had warped so quickly. How I could possibly rectify it... And every time I inhaled his lingering scent, I was reminded of what we'd done in the kitchen. How perfectly our bodies fit together. How my blood sang in response to his touch.

A dull ache spread through my belly.

Although I smelled like I belonged to Malik, I felt further away from him than ever.

10

MALIK

Iran.

Like a damned coward, I ran from my mate.

The memory of tears brimming in her brilliant blues haunted every step I took as I fled from Intonat Nocteterritory. She'd tried to explain herself, a debilitating combination of horror and guilt scrawled across her angelic features, as if she thought she was to blame for the drastic change of events.

That couldn't have been further from the truth.

If anyone needed to apologize, it was me. For reacting the way I did to her fingers merely brushing my scars. For storming out of the house without explanation. For shackling her to an irreparably damaged mate.

An overbearing tangle of self-loathing and guilt churned in the pit of my stomach for hours on end, driving me further and further away from Aria. My psyche teetered on a dangerous edge. One moment, I wanted nothing more than to disappear or find some being strong enough to snuff the life from my veins, if only to give my little dove a chance at happiness elsewhere. The next, I felt the undeniable urge to return to her.

Eventually, when the sun disappeared behind the horizon and streaks of orange and purple painted the sky, I found myself outside of my little cottage once more.

My chest still felt tight, and I couldn't force my claws to retreat from the tips of my fingers, so I clamped my hands into fists and allowed the daggers to slice into my palms. The pain was a welcome distraction.

I'd stopped by the pack's outhouse to collect the clothing I'd abandoned earlier that morning so I'd be fully clothed when I returned. I didn't fully understand why. Aria had already seen my naked body. Perhaps because a part of me wanted to appear civil for her, despite my monstrous appearance.

As I approached the front door, my steps slowed. I paused and held my breath, focusing on the soft thrum of Aria's heartbeat on the other side of the wooden barrier.

She was still here. She hadn't run away.

Releasing a deep exhale, I took a key from my back pocket and slipped it into the

deadbolt. It was already unlocked, as if she'd left it open for me in hopes that I'd come home. Another day, I'd warn her to always keep the house locked when she was alone, but today, I allowed the thought to soothe the painful emptiness spanning the spot where my heart should've been.

When I opened the door, Aria's sweet scent infiltrated my lungs alongside a different, more savory smell. The lights were dim, but my eyes quickly adjusted as I stepped inside.

"You're back." Aria's soft voice reached me like a lark's song, a tantalizing melody of hopefulness and regret.

She stood beside the kitchen table, a small circular slab of wood I'd cut and carved a handful of years ago. Three candles burned atop the tablecloth, rivulets of wax dripping down all sides. She must've stolen them from a drawer in the kitchen. The flames had nearly reached the quick, like they'd been burning—waiting—for hours.

"I made dinner," she continued, a slight tremble to her words. "I couldn't find many ingredients in your pantry or refrigerator, but I managed to scrounge up some spaghetti. I know it's not much, but..." Aria trailed off, her fingers fidgeting with the hem of her t-shirt.

She made me dinner.

I couldn't remember the last time someone made me dinner.

Unable to voice my gratitude or the beginnings of an apology, I merely turned to shut the front door behind me then approached the table.

As I passed the kitchen counter, the lingering scent of Aria's arousal from earlier in the day infiltrated by nostrils, and regret lanced through me. I willed myself not to

think about it—not to spiral back into that pit of self-hatred and degradation. If I wanted any shot at making this female mine, I couldn't allow those dark thoughts to govern me.

She remained standing by one of the chairs, hands clasping and unclasping in front of her. A sliver of white surrounded her irises as she watched my every movement.

When I arrived opposite her, I glanced at the immaculately set table. Empty plates graced each placemat, flanked by forks, knives, and water glasses with condensation dripping down the sides. And, between the placemats, sat a notepad and pen.

She noticed the direction of my gaze and cleared her throat. “I- I thought we could get to know one another. We’ll ask each other questions and both write our answers down. It—” A small, hopeful smile graced her lips. “It’ll be like passing notes.”

Like passing notes. I’d never done that before. Come to think of it, no one had ever attempted to communicate with me on my level. If we couldn’t speak via mind-link, they simply didn’t bother trying.

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Something warm and foreign swelled up inside of me.

I dipped my chin in a nod, praying that my eyes conveyed what my voice could not. Yes, I'd like to get to know you, too.

Relief flooded her crystalline gaze, and her smile widened. "Okay. You sit down, and I'll get the spaghetti. Are you hungry?"

I heeded her instructions, lowering to the nearest seat and nodding my answer. In fact, I was famished.

"One heaping serving, coming right up," she answered, her feet fluttering toward the stovetop, where a large pan of spaghetti simmered on the lowest heat setting.

I watched her move throughout my kitchen like she'd been doing it her whole life, diving between drawers to retrieve silverware and potholders. An overwhelming sense of frightness filled me, and I couldn't help but lean back in my chair to admire my little mate. Moon Goddess, was she really mine?

Soon enough, a full plate of pasta and red sauce stared back at me, though I waited until Aria sat down to begin shoveling the home cooked meal into my mouth. I was so engrossed in the first few bites that I didn't notice Aria scribbling on the notepad across from me.

She slid the paper in my direction, a single line written in her bubbly handwriting.

Are you ready for question one? I won't hold back...

My eyes flickered back up to her, but she already watched me with mischief dancing in her gaze. I finished chewing my latest bite of pasta and shifted in my seat, suddenly unnerved by the prospect of what she might ask me. I nodded, though worry festered in my mind at the thought of disclosing my horrifying past on yellow notebook paper in a matter of minutes.

Aria wasted no time in scribbling down her question, and my heart lurched into my throat when she extended the notepad toward me again.

What is your favorite color?

My answer: Green.

My favorite color? I blinked, then looked across the table at her with a cocked brow. So this was her definition of ‘I won’t hold back?’

She giggled, and every fiber in my body sang.

My scar tissue pulled as my lips curled into a smirk, and I exchanged my fork for the pen and paper. My handwriting couldn’t hold a flame to Aria’s neat script, but it sufficed. The answer to her question was a simple one, though it had recently changed.

Blue. Like the sky.

And your eyes. I kept those damning words to myself and slid the notepad back to her.

Aria’s face lit up when she read my answer, but she returned the notepad back to me. “Your turn to ask the question,” she explained, opting to take a few bites of spaghetti while I had control of the conversation.

I paused and stared down at the empty lines. I didn't know what sort of questions to ask. I wanted to know everything about my little dove, but I decided to stick to the basics.

What are your favorite things to do?

My answer: Reading.

Sliding the notepad back to her, I didn't eat while I waited on her response, too enthralled by the sight of her baby blues scanning the lines. By the way her tongue split her lips as she started to concentrate on her reply. The way her fingers effortlessly guided the pen across page. She seemed to be writing a damn paragraph, not a short reply.

I protest! I believe you said "favorite thingS," which is plural. You only gave ONE favorite thing. Nonetheless, I like to cook, watch bad reality television, and work as a healer.

What do you like to read?

The vibrancy of her written word jumped off the page, and I could practically hear the words in her honey sweet voice. Heat crept up my neck at her teasing protest, and I knew she wanted more information about my favorite things to do in my spare time. Unfortunately, I didn't have an answer.

I spent most of my time by Roman's side or doing his bidding. My younger brother kept me busy in my roles as general, enforcer, executioner, defender... Whatever spare time I was afforded, I liked to use it reading and sleeping. Nonetheless, I attempted to mimic her playful attitude in my next response.

I apologize for my inadequate response, though any further answer would've been a

lie. To make up for it, would you like to ask TWO questions on your next turn. Is that fair?

I like to read anything, but historical biographies are my favorite.

I extended the notebook back to my mate, and she eagerly took it from my hands. Her smile grew with every word she read, and, when she finished, she turned that grin on me and very nearly knocked the breath from my lungs.

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“I accept your offer,” she cooed before busying herself with writing her next questions.

Things continued like this for well over an hour. I learned her favorite foods for each meal of the day—omelette, chicken salad sandwich, and macaroni and cheese, respectively—and how she came to work as a healer in her father’s pack. She asked me about my favorite book—a historical recounting of the middle ages that shaped Europe—and whether I was a night owl or an early bird.

I noticed Aria kept her questions surface-level, never probing too deeply into my past or my internal longings, and I was grateful to her for it. In truth, a part of me wanted to offer her a deeper slice of my life. Wanted to open a window to my soul for her eyes only. But what if she hated what she saw? What if she glimpsed the realest, rawest truths of my history and wanted no part of it.

More importantly, how could I blame her?

When both of our plates were empty and our glasses of water drained, Aria’s mouth cracked open in a dainty yawn, even as she clutched our most recent correspondence to her chest. She needed sleep.

My gaze softened. I held one hand out as a silent request for the notepad, even though it wasn’t my turn. She didn’t protest as she handed it to me, blinking the exhaustion from her eyes.

Thank you for dinner. And for the conversation.

You go to bed. I'll clean up.

Aria's brows pulled together as she read my message. When she finished, she set the notepad aside and shook her head, tucking a strand of honey blonde behind her ear. "I'll clean up in the morning. Will you... I mean, would you like to come to bed with me?"

My heartbeat accelerated. Memories of last night flooded my head, morphing into flashes of our heated encounter in the kitchen this morning. My hips rocking against the seam of her jeans, racking up the pressure at the base of my spine. My canines longing to sink into the sensitive skin at the base of her neck at the same moment my cock pushed through her intact barrier. Then, her fingers accidentally brushing against the distorted flesh that sliced me from ear to ear. The panic. The instinct to fight.

As if she could read the conflicting emotions on my face, Aria continued. "We don't have to touch. I—I won't touch you, I mean." Color rose on her cheeks, and when she spoke again, her voice was quieter. Shy. "I just want you beside me."

Her words calmed the storm in my mind. Soothed the doubt roiling through my veins. I wanted that, too. More than anything.

Slowly, I dipped my chin and stood from the table, extending a hand for Aria to take. She grasped it without hesitation, without recoiling at my scars or the invisible blood staining my hands. And, when she met my gaze before pulling me into the bedroom, I had the distinct feeling that she saw me.

She saw me—all the ugly, painful parts that marked me a monster—and it didn't scare her.

ARIA

It felt like an elastic band connected my body—my soul—to Malik.

I sensed it when he left today, pulling tighter and tighter the more distance he put between us. At the time, I thought my ribcage might break apart and my chest cavity might shatter if we failed to reunite. Likewise, I felt it when he decided to come home. That invisible chord connecting our bodies slackened, easing the pain and longing deep at the center of my being.

And I felt it now, thrumming like it held a mind of its own and delighted in his nearness as he followed me into the bedroom.

I'd explored the cottage in the hours of Malik's absence, relying on the rooms and items to learn more about the male. I hadn't learned much, except that he was obscenely tidy, boasted an impressive library of books, and clearly didn't spend much time in his kitchen. No photos of friends or family decorated the walls or shelves in any room, though his living room wall held a single painting of a flock of gulls soaring above a rocky beach. I wondered if he chose it for the beach or the birds, as if the answer might afford me some glimpse into his soul.

That was when I came up with the idea of our little 'passing notes' game. I needed to know more about Malik but wanted to do it on his terms. Though my hand ached from writing so much, it went even better than expected.

It went so well that, now, Malik willingly trailed after me into his bedroom.

As soon as we crossed the threshold, he dropped my hand and closed the door, the soft click of the wooden frame sounding behind me. I glanced over my shoulder and, though my heart fluttered like a hummingbird's wings in my chest, offered him a smile.

“Your house is beautiful,” I murmured, rubbing at my exposed arms. Suddenly, goosebumps peppered my skin. “I hope you don’t mind that I explored it while you were gone...”

Malik didn’t smile, but he didn’t frown either. He shook his head, hovering just inside of the doors he’d just shut.

My towering mate regarded me like I was some vexing, wild creature that he didn’t quite know what to do with, and I had to bite the inside of my cheek to keep from chuckling at the irony of it. This male, who was quite possibly the strongest werewolf I’d ever seen, looked upon me with apprehension in his gaze.

“Do you want to get ready for bed first?” I ventured, gesturing toward the bathroom. I figured he should get to use it first. He owned the house, after all.

Even so, Malik jerked his head no. His broad shoulders leaned back against the door, pressing into the wood to put even more space between our bodies. My presence in his bedroom seemed to put him on edge.

Realizing he probably wouldn’t move until I gave him some space, I cleared my throat and conjured my gentlest smile. “Okay, I’ll go first.”

I disappeared into the bathroom and made quick work of brushing my teeth with one of the unopened toothbrushes I found in a drawer, then washed my face and shimmied out of my jeans. Malik’s sagging t-shirt followed before I shed the panties and bra I’d been wearing for the last two days.

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Stepping back, I studied my naked reflection in the mirror. Some wicked, needy part of me considered what might happen if I returned to the bedroom like this, in my barest yet most powerful form. Would the thin thread of Malik's control snap? Would he turn away in disgust?

I blinked and shook my head, ridding myself of those thoughts. I'd promised not to touch him. I wouldn't risk his tentative trust with such antics, no matter how much every base, primal instinct begged to be claimed by him. I could be patient. I had to be.

But I also needed fresh clothing.

Taking a deep breath, I padded toward the door and cracked it open just enough to peek my head through, careful to keep my naked body hidden. "Uh, Malik?"

He looked up from where he now sat at the edge of the bed, head bowed low and knees resting on his elbows. Like a bruised and battered warrior who'd returned from a lifetime of war.

My top teeth dragged on my bottom lip. "I don't have any pajamas. Do you have a t-shirt I can wear?"

Malik's good eye trailed from my face to my exposed neck and bare shoulder, and I saw the moment he realized I was naked behind the door. The black of his eye expanded until only a sliver of gray remained.

Slowly, he stood, every long muscle stretching until he reached his full height. With the grace of a predator, he stalked to the closet and returned a moment later with a

bundle of white fabric in one hand.

As he drew closer, I noticed the way a muscle in his jaw quivered when he extended the t-shirt for me. I took it, and electricity pulsed where my fingers grazed his, shooting straight to my core. Familiar heat flared between my legs.

A blush flamed my cheeks, and I clamped my legs together to keep the scent of my arousal from reaching him before I shut the door. Moon Goddess! We'd barely even touched!

Rather than immediately dress, I clamped my eyes shut and took deep, measured breaths until my heart rate declined. I felt betrayed by my body, which clearly had a mind of its own.

Finally, I slid the huge white tee over my head and slipped my arms in the sleeves. The hem reached the middle of my thighs, so I deemed it safe enough to wear to bed, even without panties or a bra. After slathering a healthy amount of lotion onto my legs and arms in an effort to conceal the remnants of my sex-crazed scent, I crept out of the bathroom once more.

Malik sat on the bed again. This time, however, he didn't have to look up to meet my gaze. I wondered if he'd been staring, unable to look away from the moment I shut the door in his face.

Mustering my courage, I approached the bed.

His nostrils flared, chest expanding. Then, with rigid control, he rose from the mattress and took my place in the bathroom, leaving a wide berth between us as he passed.

I slipped beneath the covers, blood pounding between my ears and adrenaline

coursing through my veins. We'd slept side by side last night, of course, but this felt different. I hadn't fallen asleep with him beside me. In fact, I had no idea he'd come to bed until I woke up in his arms the next morning.

The shower turned on inside the bathroom, and I focused on my breathing. On the soft caress of silken sheets against my bare legs. On the delicious scent of tobacco and mint that coated every inch of my pillow. Anything to keep myself from imagining his naked body, just a few paces and a wall away.

I didn't know how much time had passed by the time the water stopped running and Malik finished inside the bathroom. Every modicum of my being focused on his steady movements on the other side of the door. On his heady scent and the strong beat of his heart.

When he emerged, he hesitated, lingering by the door. He wore a pair of sweatpants that hung low, accentuating the cuts of muscle on his hips. Dark hair sprouted below his navel, disappearing beneath the waistline to join the substantial bulge at his inseam.

I sat upright in bed and kept the silken sheets covering my hips.

"Malik?" I prompted, my voice a hopeful whisper.

His throat bobbed, the mass of scar tissue rising and falling along with the knob of his ruined voice box. At last, he took a step toward me. Then another. And another.

As if he was a frightened animal in the woods, I made certain not to move and scare him away. Eventually, he slipped beneath the covers, and his warmth radiated toward me from across the bed.

A small, triumphant smile curled on my lips as I slowly leaned back against my

pillow again. Silence, neither comfortable nor uncomfortable, settled over the bedroom. Only our shallow breathing filled the space around us.

“Thank you,” I murmured, forcing myself to keep my eyes on the ceiling above. “For coming to bed with me.”

He shifted beside me, the mattress sinking beneath his heavy weight. I held my breath as he moved closer, and it swept out of my lungs the moment his fingers brushed a rogue strand of hair away from my brow.

I allowed my eyes to find his in the dark.

He was close. Far closer than I’d realized. Only a sliver of space separated our bodies, and I longed to bridge that gap. Longed to stroke his disheveled hair and offer him a fraction of the pleasure that he gave me.

“Malik,” I choked out his name, and I swore I heard his ragged intake of breath at the sound of it on my lips. “I’d like to try something. Only if you want to, of course...”

His hand didn’t retreat from where he now stroked my hair, which I took as a good sign. I continued. “Will you show me where and how I can touch you?”

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Malik stiffened at my request, his brow furrowing in clear hesitation.

“Do it to me, so that I’ll know what you’d be okay with me doing to you.” My tongue darted out to wet my lips. “We can start slow. I won’t move. I promise. I- I trust you.”

His gaze narrowed, and my heart thundered. One long moment passed, and I readied myself for rejection. Seconds before I lost my courage and dismissed the entire idea, however, he moved.

Malik continued stroking my hairline, though each careful sweep of his thumb became intentional. Then, slowly, his fingers moved to trace the edge of the left side of my face, spanning from my temple to my jawline.

My lashes fluttered closed, pleasure and warmth sparking wherever the rough pads of his fingers touched. I melted back into my pillow when the pad of his thumb hovered just above the left corner of my lips.

He left the right side of my face untouched, and the message behind that choice was clear. He didn’t want me touching his scars. Not yet.

Malik spent long minutes tracing the features on half of my face, and I half-expected him to leave it at that. Goddess knew it would’ve been enough. And yet, when his fingers disappeared from my cheek, I opened my eyes again to find his attention focused entirely on my torso and arms.

He touched my hand first, the pads of his fingers barely grazing my fingertips. He

traced each digit with his own, culminating at the center of my palm.

“That tickles,” I teased, watching in fascination as my mate repeated the ministration.

One corner of his lips curled into a half-smile at my words, but it fell away as quickly as it appeared. He was focused, like an eager student studying before a test.

He turned his attention to my wrist, rubbing the fluttering pulse point that revealed just how much his touch affected me. My synapses misfired. My heart rate turned erratic. I buzzed with electricity yet made every effort to remain still. It was the purest form of torture.

Malik’s hand drifted higher up my arm, sliding above the oversized t-shirt that stopped at my elbow. He skimmed up to my shoulder, then his fingers paused.

His gaze flickered back to mine, and I read the silent question in that deep gray. Is this okay?

I nodded and whispered without breath, “Go ahead.”

With heartbreaking tenderness, his huge palm lowered to my chest, settling directly overtop my heart.

Warmth seeped from his body into mine as he kept his hand there, pressed against the upper swell of my breast. It wasn’t a sexual touch, though that didn’t stop my nipples from aching for attention. He didn’t grope. Didn’t explore. We simply existed like that, Malik’s hand over my heart.

He watched my chest rise and fall with each breath, as if he couldn’t quite believe I was real and alive and here. As if he couldn’t believe I was his.

Careful not to startle him, I lifted my own palm and laid it on top of his hand. He stiffened at the newfound contact, then relaxed back against the pillow. My eyes drifted shut, but I held him to my breast.

I wouldn't give him up, even in sleep.

12

ARIA

In my dreams, I gave myself to Malik, over and over again.

In my dreams, his hands didn't cease their exploration at my heart. They played my naked body like an instrument, coaxing unfamiliar sounds from my lips in a symphony of need. He suckled the tips of my breasts, lavishing me with his tongue. He kissed the slope of my abdomen, each hip bone, then the golden curls covering my sex.

Each caress contributed to the tension building at the base of my spine, winding it tighter and tighter until I was certain I'd explode into a thousand little pieces. He surged inside of me, and my body careened toward that beautiful, tantalizing edge?—

And I woke up. Alone.

The insatiable heat radiating between my legs served as a painful reminder that none of it was real. Arousal wet my inner thighs, yet the bedroom held no trace of Malik.

Blinking away the sunlight that peeked through the window, I placed a hand on his side of the mattress, only to find the sheets cold. He'd left early.

I prayed he'd left early enough that he hadn't scented the evidence of my sinful

dreams...

With a groan, I tossed over on the mattress and buried my head in the pillow. The thick cushion muffled my frustrated scream, all while my thighs clamped tight beneath the sheets. I was half-tempted to stroke myself in search of that blessed relief, something I'd never even considered doing to myself before.

I wasn't used to this...wanting.

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I attributed it to nature. To my wolf's innate desire to be claimed by her mate. To the hormones in my body that began pumping and churning the moment I locked eyes with Malik. To a she-wolf's natural inclination to bring forth strong, healthy pups for the pack.

Even so, I couldn't shake the deep-seated feeling that it went deeper than that. I couldn't deny the affection I held for Malik. The warmth that swelled in my chest every time a smile dared to pull on his mouth. The itch in my fingers to stroke his hair and hold him when darkness settled over his features.

I wanted, more than anything, to bridge the gap he'd created between us. To chip away at the wall he'd constructed around himself.

It would take time. I knew that now. Though Malik's scars told of a tragic past, the wounds he carried beneath the surface ran deep. They would not be so easily healed.

At long last, I forced myself to slip out of bed, only to trip on a bundle of bags at my feet that I swore weren't there last night. Shopping bags.

I crouched beside one of the bags and plucked a neatly folded piece of paper from its depths. My heart burst into one hundred wingbeats at the now-familiar handwriting.

Little dove,

Good morning. Thank you again for last night.

I asked Emerson to find you some clothing. She brought these bags over this

morning. If they are not to your liking, feel free to purchase whatever you need.

The pack's lead nurse, Estelle, is looking forward to meeting you today. Emerson will show you to the infirmary. Be safe.

Yours,

Malik

Careful not to wrinkle my mate's note, I placed it on the nightstand before dropping to my knees beside the bags of clothing. I rifled through layer after layer of sweaters and blouses, jeans and leggings, and silky little pajamas. Emerson hadn't just bought me some clothes—she seemed to have cleared out an entire department store.

I dared to check the price-tag on an unfathomably soft sweatshirt, only to choke at the three digits staring back at me. Guilt tugged at the pit of my stomach as I shoved the lounge-wear back into its bag. I could guess whose bank account had taken the brunt of the shopping spree's damage.

I made a mental note to return at least four-fifths of the items Emerson bought, not because I disliked them but because I didn't want Malik spending such obscene amounts of money on me. Growing up, my father's pack was small enough that our family possessed a modest income. Exorbitant spending felt like a sin.

Eventually, I picked through the bags until I found a pair of leggings and a workout tank with a matching jacket. After I finished getting ready, I took an apple from the near-empty produce drawer in Malik's refrigerator, promised myself that I'd find a way to get more food by the end of the day, and walked out the front door.

Just like yesterday, Emerson waited just beyond the threshold.

The red-haired young woman perked up when she saw me, though she shot me a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. In fact, she seemed nervous. "Good morning, Aria."

"Hi, Emerson." I shut the door behind me and turned to face her, offering her a smile. "Thanks for the clothes. I really like what you picked out."

A blush tainted her cheeks, making her freckles darken. "It was the least I could do after yesterday." Shame leaked into her voice. "I shouldn't have left you to go with Anders. I heard... I know what Alpha Roman tried to do. I'm sorry."

My brows shot to my hairline. Though my encounter with Alpha Roman had been unfortunate, to say the least, I never once thought to blame her.

"Please," I murmured, placing a hand on Emerson's shoulder. "Don't apologize. There was nothing any of us could've done to stop him." Except for Malik. Malik made him stop. "It was probably best that you weren't there."

Emerson pulled her bottom lip between her teeth and shook her head. "Still, I'm sorry. I know what it's like to be on the receiving end of the Alpha's antics."

I didn't doubt that. As an omega, the young female inevitably received the lion's share of the pack's bullying. Perhaps that explained why Malik considered Emerson a friend. He understood what his brother was capable of.

My hand fell away from Emerson's shoulder, and I willed a cheerful smile onto my lips as we began walking along the pathway from the cottage. "Let's hope neither of us have to deal with Roman today, Goddess willing."

Emerson giggled. "Yes. We should be safe in the infirmary. Alpha Roman rarely gets injured."

Too bad,I almost snorted. Instead, I decided to learn more about my new hosts.

“I’m surprised,” I mused, feigning interest in the clouds above. “Considering theIntonat Noctehas been conquering packs across the north for years.”

“Oh, Alpha Roman does not travel with the army. The General leads every campaign.”

The General.My mate.

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I couldn't contain my frown, my head jerking to look sideways at Emerson. "Roman forces his younger brother to fight his own battles? That hardly instills any faith in him as alpha."

Emerson's eyes widened, and she scanned our surroundings as if she expected someone to be eavesdropping. She lowered her voice. "You don't know? Roman is not the oldest. Malik is several years older than his brother."

My steps faltered. If Malik was older than Roman, then...

"Why is Roman alpha, then? Did he defeat Malik in a fight?" I asked, more of a demand than a question.

Even as I spoke the words out loud, I knew they couldn't have been true. It seemed so obvious now. Staring at the two males side by side, it was clear that both possessed alpha's blood. Even so, Roman could hardly compare to Malik's sheer size and muscle mass.

Emerson worried her lip, eyes flashing to every bush and tree that someone might've been hiding behind. "It was decided long ago by the former alpha, their father," she whispered. "I don't know anything else."

My heart pounded against my ribcage, adrenaline pumping through my blood at the injustice. As the firstborn son of analpha, Malik should've been next in line, unless Roman managed to defeat him in a duel. From Emerson's explanation, no such battle ever took place.

So how had my mate come to serve under his younger brother?

We walked in relative silence the rest of the way to the infirmary, my mind too preoccupied with the information Emerson disclosed to conjure up any semblance of conversation. More than once, I caught my hands curling into tight fists.

Though I'd only been at the Intonat Nocte Pack for two days, I'd seen enough of Roman to know that he didn't deserve to call himself Alpha. His arrogance and cruelty overshadowed any semblance of kindness he'd displayed in my short time here.

When we arrived at the medical building a short distance from the training grounds, I forced myself to push the warring thoughts from my head. I needed to make a good impression on Estelle if I wanted the nurse to allow me to practice alongside her.

Emerson led me into the clinic, and my mouth fell open at the impressive facility.

At least a dozen beds lined the main room, each with an immaculately organized station beside it that held an assortment of bandages and salves and stitching materials. The scent of alcohol and fresh linens washed over me, masking any trace of death or disease within these walls. Several hallways stemmed away from the large open space, leading to doors labeled 'Radiation' or 'Operating Room.'

In my awe, I laughed. "This is incredible."

"I'm glad you like it," a woman's voice sounded from behind me.

I spun around to face the newcomer, a tall woman with mocha skin and tight black curls. Her warm brown eyes held no trace of the hostility I'd come to expect from most Intonat Noctemembers.

“I’m Estelle.” She extended a hand to shake, her palm dry from countless pumps of hand sanitizer throughout each day. “You must be Aria.”

Nodding, I clasped my hands together in front of me. “Your clinic is beautiful. I’ve never been inside one so big.”

She chuckled and winked. “Well, let me show you around and introduce you to everyone. We’re having a slow morning since training hasn’t started yet, but maybe we’ll get some patients by the time we’re done.”

True to her prediction, several young warriors were brought into the clinic from the training grounds an hour later. To my surprise and excitement, Estelle allowed me to treat my own patient—a teenager with a broken collarbone that needed setting before her body could heal incorrectly.

“That was quite impressive,” Estelle praised when we stepped away from the injured teen. “When did you begin working with your pack’s physician, again?”

“Goddess, I think I was... thirteen?” I washed my hands at the sink, smiling at the fond memories of building my craft. “Of course, we hardly saw more than two patients a week back home.”

Since I walked through the doors this morning, four patients had cycled through the hospital beds. All of them were teenagers who’d only recently begun training with the established warriors.

Estelle hummed. “Even so, you clearly know what you’re doing. If you’d like to be added to the full-time schedule here at the clinic, just say the word.”

There was no concealing my elation. A beaming grin spread on my lips as I turned to face the lead nurse. “Yes, please.”

Estelle chuckled. “Good. We’ll be especially busy for the rest of the week making preparations for Friday night.”

“Friday night?”

She cocked a questioning brow, as if surprised by my ignorance. “The full moon. It’s always the busiest night of the month.”

I blinked. The full moon. Goddess, it’d completely slipped my mind since arriving at the In-tonat Nocte Pack.

Just as the moon impacts the tides, it holds considerable power over shifters. At the height of the lunar cycle, the lines between humanity and primitive instinct blur, and our species reverts to its lupine roots.

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My father always kept me hidden away on the night of a full moon, but I'd heard stories. Even in our small, civilized pack, chaos would reign. Males would fight one another over the smallest disagreements, injuring one another or worse. Males and females would copulate beneath the luminescent glow for all the world to see. Most of the time, unmated individuals were most at risk of succumbing to their base desires.

I swallowed. "Right. Of course. I'd be happy to help prepare."

At that moment, the clinic's door swung open again, and a scream pierced the air.

13

ARIA

Two soldiers carried another injured through the door. The young man's leg twisted in an unnatural direction, and a shudder coursed through my body at the agony in his cries.

"Goddess," Estelle hissed under her breath before rushing away from me, barking orders at the soldiers to place the new patient on a hospital bed. "What in the hells happened?"

One of the soldiers shrugged a heavy shoulder. "Buckled beneath him while defending against a larger opponent. Don't know why he's cryin' so much, though."

As if on cue, the injured man emitted a pitiful sob as the two soldiers placed him

horizontally on the nearest open bed.

“Aw, you’ll be alright Gio.” The other soldier clapped the injured man on the shoulder. All three individuals were as naked as the day they were born, clearly having just shifted from their wolf forms. “Welcome to the big leagues, kid.”

The soldiers chuckled at the younger male’s expense, and I rolled my eyes. Clearly the experienced warriors were enjoying their inferiors’ struggles. Brutes.

“You two,” Estelle growled at the two men that delivered their injured comrade. “Get out before I force you to volunteer the rest of your day in the clinic.”

The pair continued laughing as they heeded Estelle’s warning, striding toward the exit like they owned the damn building. This, I thought to myself. This is why I didn’t want to be a warrior.

Several nurses flocked to Estelle’s side to help treat the broken leg. If I joined, I’d only get in the way. Instead, I released a long sigh and wandered toward where Emerson stood by the window, eager to distract myself from the man, Gio’s, agony.

Her pin-straight auburn hair gleamed with golden highlights in the sun, and her eyes widened in awe at whatever she watched beyond the glass pane. She noticed me approaching and cast me a small smile.

“They’re practicing defending while outnumbered,” she explained, nodding toward the window. I arrived at her side, and my eyes widened at the scene unfolding at the bottom of the hill. “It’s exciting, isn’t it?”

Indeed, dozens of warriors in human and wolf form alike gathered on the training field below. They were broken into three groups, and each group possessed a team of attackers that hopelessly outnumbered the defensive team. Jaws snapped. Claws

raked down one another's flanks. I could hear the snarling from here.

Those actively engaged in the fighting took their wolf forms, while the males and females resting remained in their human forms. Among them, I recognized a pair of exceptionally broad shoulders overseeing the entire exercise. My heart somersaulted.

"Malik is here," I stated, betraying my surprise.

Emerson giggled beside me. "Well, he is the general."

"Right," I breathed, though all of my focus centered on the male at the center of the clearing below.

A pair of sweatpants hung low on Malik's hips, though he wore no cover over his impressive torso. His arms folded tight over his chest, and I could see his bulging biceps and shoulders from here. Long, unkempt hair fell past his shoulders, in desperate need of a haircut. Only the scarred portion of his features faced the clinic's window, but the gruesome flesh didn't startle me any more.

Below, a wolf with an inky coat trotted over to Malik from another group. Halfway across the clearing, the wolf shifted into a tall, lithe-limbed female.

Golden skin stretched over long, muscled legs. A sheet of black, silky hair fell to the middle of her back. Her breasts, full and round, practically bounced with every graceful step she took toward my mate, and, even from here, I could tell that her pubic hair was immaculately trimmed into a thin line leading to her sex.

The female came to a stop beside Malik, and an ugly tangle of possessiveness and anger flared in my gut.

She lifted her hand and pointed toward one of the groups of warriors, and Malik's

gaze followed suit. They must've been speaking via their mind link, and a pang of jealousy speared through my chest at the easiness of their communication.

Emerson glanced sideways at me, undoubtedly sensing the newfound tension racking my body, then back at Malik and this female. A small, knowing smile played on her lips. "That is Freya. She's a squadron leader."

I crossed my arms over my chest and feigned nonchalance with a shrug.

Below, the beautiful female—Freya—looked up at Malik with an amused smile, and I swore I saw the corner of his mouth quirk upward.

My gut twisted as the pair seemed to share an inside joke.

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What the hell was wrong with me? This female was one of Malik's soldiers. They'd likely known each other and fought alongside one another for years. Still, I envied her for the time she'd gotten to spend beside my mate.

Even more, I wasn't foolish enough to believe that most shifters remain abstinent prior to finding their mate. Most sought relief with other unmated wolves when the need arose...

Admiration and intimacy sparkled in Freya's gaze as she gazed up at Malik, and the traitorous, insecure parts of myself wondered if perhaps their relationship extended beyond mere colleagues. Standing side by side, the pair made a startlingly powerful match. It wouldn't have been such a surprise.

The thought hurt far more than I'd ever admit out loud.

MALIK

The back of my neck tingled, and a now-familiar tug plucked at the fibers at the center of my body. I turned my head, following the direction of the tug toward the clinic overlooking the training grounds.

The sun glared against the windows, preventing me from seeing inside, but I knew who watched me from within. I felt it in my bones. In the way my blood warmed and my spine straightened, and my feet longed to carry me away from my duty as General to reunite with my little dove.

This morning, I awoke with Aria in my arms. We were curled around one another,

our foreheads touching as we shared the same breath. Her legs tangled with mine, and a soft mewl of displeasure escaped her parted lips when I forced myself to slip away.

It had taken everything in me to leave her there. Last night, she'd been so patient. Like an angel sent from the Moon Goddess to guide me through the uncharted waters of allowing another person into my life.

Every soft word and tentative touch melted away a fraction of the steely wall I'd built around my heart over the past two decades. Aria was slowly saving me from myself, and, for that, I was eternally grateful.

General? Freya's voice echoed in my mind.

My gaze snapped back to my captain. She looked up at me with a furrowed brow, and, when I didn't immediately respond, she repeated the question she must've asked moments ago. What do you want me to do with the recruits?

Right. We'd been discussing the recruits, the shifters from across our territory that had recently come of age and hoped to earn a spot in our army. Though a handful showed potential, most would die the moment they saw true battle.

I sighed. Send them all back to basic training. Even those with solid technique. They're no use to me until they're all stronger and faster.

Though my brother would see all of the recruits thrown into the army at the lowest ranks, allowing the strong to rise and the weak to fall, I refused to sign their death warrants. Whereas Roman wanted sheer numbers in his army, I only wanted the best fighting alongside me in battle. Fortunately, more often than not, Roman paid no attention to my choices as General.

Freya dipped her chin and turned to heed my command, but she didn't make it more

than two steps before turning back.

Malik? She prompted, her voice softer than before. I recognized the imploring tone, and it set my teeth on edge. What of your mate? The alpha's daughter. Will she be gracing the army with her presence?

I stiffened, discomfort lining my spine.

There was a poorly-veiled edge to Freya's words. One that I recognized from the countless times I'd refused her advances in the past. She was a fine warrior and objectively beautiful, certain to bear strong pups to whatever male she chose, but I'd never once been tempted to accept her offer.

She only wanted me for my position and the blood pumping through my veins, but I refused to be a commodity for yet another. Not when I'd already surrendered myself to Roman long ago.

When at first I did not respond, Freya continued, eyes trailing down my bare chest, lingering on my neck. I couldn't help but notice that you have yet to cement the bond... Is there something wrong with the girl?

Unadulterated anger roiled through me, and I shifted to face one of my best warriors. My head cocked to one side, a silent snarl forming on my lips. Careful, Freya. You may be a captain, but you're far from irreplaceable.

She blinked, dark brown eyes going wide as she took a step backward. The scent of her fear seeped into the air between us. Forgive me, General. I only asked?—

You will not speak of Aria again. You will not even think her name, I warned, allowing a sliver of innate alpha's authority to slip into the command.

When my father named Roman heir, I surrendered my right to use the primal ability that allowed an alpha to give unbreakable orders. That did not mean that I lost the skill completely, though Roman would punish me if he knew I dared to use it on one of his subjects.

Even so, I would not allow Aria to be dishonored. Not by this female. Not by anyone.

Freya retreated without another word, and I turned my gaze back to the clinic atop the hill and the blonde she-wolf hidden inside. A strange cocktail of desire and unease churned in my chest, for, though I'd dismissed Freya's words, the audacity of her statement served as a reminder that I needed to mark my little dove, and soon.

Aria wouldn't be mine, not truly, until I did.

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Whatever hopes I'd had for me and Aria this evening were snuffed out by a summons to the pack house.

Roman wanted our presence for a formal dinner with a visiting alpha from the south—one that he'd failed to inform me of until an hour before it began. He'd invited the alpha to visit the Intonat Nocte Pack for the sole purpose of meeting the male's daughter. She possessed an alpha's blood and a fertile womb—the only two prerequisites my brother deemed necessary in a Luna.

To make matters worse, something was wrong with my little dove. From the moment I returned to the cottage this evening, every smile failed to meet her eyes and she quietly avoided my gaze. Nervous energy prickled in the space between us.

This was before I even told her about Roman's dinner party at the main house.

Now, we made the trek to the pack house in silence, only the sounds of our footsteps and evening crickets filling the air. My fingers furled and unfurled into fists, an outlet for the anxiety roiling through me in waves.

She was sad. I felt it as readily as it showed on her face, like whatever turmoil pulling on her heartstrings tugged on mine, as well.

Goddess, what had I done? What had changed from last night?

As far as I knew, she spent the day with Emerson and Estelle in the clinic. According to the head healer, Aria was a natural and blossomed under the pressure of treating new patients. Pride had swelled in my chest at the news, and I'd been excited to ask

Aria about it in another round of passing notes over dinner.

Now, I could hardly get her to look at me.

Something must have happened, but I detected no foreign scent on her skin nor any sign of injury or ailment. Whatever plagued my little mate, it was a pain of the heart.

With every step we took toward the pack house, I cursed Roman and his piss-poor timing.

The castle-like pack house loomed before us now, but before we could cross the threshold, Aria's steps faltered. I turned to my little mate, who stared wide-eyed at the massive structure. In the dying light, her face looked pale.

"Sorry," she murmured, shaking her head. "I was just thinking about the last time I made this walk."

Understanding swept over me. The last time she made this walk, her father walked beside her, intent on gifting his only child to Roman. Disgust still curled in my bowels at the memory of Mason Knox's surrender, serving up his daughter on a platter for Roman to do with as he pleased. Though I only felt disdain for the man, I knew Aria undoubtedly held affection for her undeserving father.

I shifted the weight on my feet, slowly invading Aria's personal space in order to place my hand on her cheek. In our short acquaintance, I'd learned that touch always brightened her eyes.

Her lashes fluttered as she lifted her chin to meet my gaze, a gasp slipping past her parted lips. Her skin warmed beneath my palm, and I dared to stroke her cheekbone with my thumb to comfort her. One beat passed before Aria relaxed into my touch, closing her eyes as she nuzzled into my palm.

And, though it was something I'd never done before, I closed the remaining distance between our bodies and dipped my face to hers.

I kissed her, just the briefest brush of my lips against hers, half-afraid that she might recoil at the touch of my twisted scar tissue. Electricity sparked where her soft flesh grazed mine, kickstarting the organ in my chest.

I pulled back in an instant, my heart thundering erratically against its cage. I was certain it might break a rib. I slipped an arm around her waist, while my hand on her cheek buried into her hair, cradling her head against my chest. I was terrified of what I might see in her eyes when the embrace stopped, so I held her.

Aria melted into me while a lethal dose of adrenaline shot through my veins. I struggled to pull air into my lungs, elation and desire and nervousness wreaking havoc on my system.

"Thank you," she whispered at last. She clasped her hands behind my back and held onto me.

Slowly, with Aria secure to my front and shadows creeping to conceal us from any onlookers, a sense of calm settled over me. I nuzzled my nose and mouth against the top of her head, inhaling her sweet scent. Goddess, she fit so perfectly against me.

Knowing that Roman would fume if we arrived late, I released Aria and took a small step back. To my pleasure, there wasn't a trace of disgust or fear in her eyes. Only affection pooled in those crystalline depths.

"Do you think we'll be able to leave early?" A mischievous smile curled on her lips, and her cheeks held a rosy tinge that hadn't been there before.

Doubtful, I wanted to say. Instead, I lifted a shoulder in a shrug and slipped my

fingers through hers. Hand in hand, we entered the pack house.

Roman had spared no expense in decorating for the visiting alpha and his daughter. Candelabras lined the main hall. The floors had been polished. Portraits of our blood ancestors were on full display, glaring down at every newcomer with vacant coldness. Soldiers stood at attention every five paces. Roman wanted to impress and intimidate.

His efforts only made me roll my eyes.

Aria's grip on my hand tightened as we walked further into the belly of the castle, and I squeezed her hand thrice. A reminder that she was not alone and my brother could not hurt her.

I smelt the foreign alpha before I saw him. He bore the stench of saltwater, a tribute to his pack's home on the southernmost sea cliffs. It was a territory that Roman had not fancied taking for himself. Yet.

Aria and I turned into the grand dining room, and the conversation went silent. Every eye in the room followed our movements as we hovered in the doorway. Platters of food waited, untouched, at the center of the feast. My brother sat at one end of the table while his guest sat opposite him. Every other seat around the table was filled by emissaries from the visiting pack and Intonas Noctemembers.

All exceptone.

Dread wound tight at the base of my spine, my features hardening as the realization hit. Anger crept up my neck.

“Ah,” Roman drawled, not bothering to stand from his seat to greet us. He leaned one elbow on the armrest, lounging back in his throne-like chair. “You’re late.”

My jaw cracked from how tightly I clamped my teeth together. He hadn’t called me here to dine with the party. I was not a guest.

Roman’s attention flashed to Aria, and my blood began to boil, simmering beneath an impassive surface. His eyes trailed down my mate’s body, taking in every curve and inch of skin. She wore an exquisite white dress with gossamer skirts that flowed to her ankles, reminiscent of the nickname I’d given her. Little dove.

My brother looked ready to devour her, and I wanted to kill him for it.

“Though, with a mate as beautiful as sweet Aria, no one could blame you for arriving late to every obligation.” His words dripped with saccharine poison, but he offered Aria a smile as he gestured toward the single open seat beside him. “Come, sit.”

Aria’s mouth hooked into a frown, and she didn’t release my hand. “There’s only one chair,” she murmured with a furrowed brow.

Roman cocked his head to the side, as if bewildered by her response.

“Of course there’s only one.” He chuckled, looking to the other Intonat Nocte Pack members around the table. Every member of his inner circle laughed alongside him.

Aria’s fingers gripped me with bruising force, and I swept a soothing thumb over her knuckles. It’s okay, I wanted to tell her, knowing that the worst was yet to come. Don’t let his words upset you.

Roman laughed again. “You don’t expect a monster to eat at the same table as his master, do you?”

Roman’s taunting echoed between my ears, and the blood rose to my cheeks. Typically, I’d let his insults roll off my back, but, at this moment, he sought to harm more than me, and his words met their mark.

Aria stiffened beside me, her lips parting in utter disgust.

Not at me, I realized. At Roman.

Her claws protruded from her fingernails, slicing into my palm. She trembled, palpable ire radiating from her.

But my brother wanted this reaction. He wanted a reason to punish us, and I refused to give it to him. I refused to let Aria sacrifice herself to defend me.

“How could you say—” She began.

I silenced her by squeezing her hand, subduing her trembling. Her face turned to me, and I shook my head, a barely perceptible twitch. No, little dove.

My heart ached for her, for the humiliation she’d endure because of me this evening. But I forced myself to begin the shameful walk to Roman’s side, nonetheless. First, I

walked Aria to the open seat beside him, pulling the chair out for her to sit.

She stared at me, a mixture of horror and anger filling her vibrant blues. For a moment, I thought she'd refuse, but I held her gaze and willed her to read the words I couldn't speak.

Trust me. Please.

Tension consumed the dining room until, at last, Aria lowered into the chair. Her hands clenched the edge of her seat, even after I pushed her chair back into place at the table. I felt Aria's gaze follow me as I stepped back and took up my position.

I struggled to keep my head high as I moved to Roman's flank. He liked for me to stand behind him at these official dinners. Like a loyal guard dog on display.

For decades, I'd bowed my head and accepted my fate. Roman saved my life from our father, after all. I owed him. But, something changed the moment I laid eyes on Aria, and every instinct in my body—every fiber that wove through me—recoiled at the idea of submitting.

It was almost as though she'd awakened the parts of me that had gone dormant since the attack. Her presence reignited the fire I'd snuffed out long ago...

In one, startling moment, I realized I wanted to kill my brother. I could do it easily. Demand a duel so that no one would dare question my authority when the life sputtered from his lungs. He could not beat me. Not in single combat, nor any other form of combat. And yet...

I was not worthy of calling myself Alpha. I could hardly call myself a male. An alpha did not hesitate to claim his mate. An alpha did not cower when fingers brushed a battle scar. An alpha required a voice.

Fighting to keep my fists from shaking, I turned to stand behind Roman's left shoulder. My brother and the rest of the Intonat Noctewarriors had already focused their attention elsewhere, though a pair of bright blue brandies me in place. I avoided Aria's gaze, all too aware that meeting it might rekindle that flame of desire to become more.

More than a guard dog. More than a monster.

More.

15

ARIA

I could hardly hear the conversation happening around the table. Not while blood pounded in my ears like a war drum. My fingers ached from how tightly they clenched my fork and knife, never bringing a morsel of food to my lips. Tears stung the surface of my eyes.

Not for myself, but for the male who stood dutifully behind his wicked brother.

It killed me inside. I wanted to scream. Wanted to obey my innermost instincts and shift right here in the dining room, if only to be given a slim opportunity to rake my claws across Roman's face.

But I'd seen the warning in Malik's gaze. Though he couldn't speak the words aloud, he needed me to stand down. Needed me to be civil despite the anger roiling through my body. I had no doubt that we would both be punished if I didn't. Only that thought stayed my hand.

So, somehow, I forced myself to bear it. I couldn't eat, but I pretended, pushing the food around on my plate while others spoke. Once, I tried to bring my water glass to my lips, but my fingers trembled so much the liquid sloshed over the rim and spilled across the tablecloth.

Malik wouldn't look at me. He wouldn't look at anyone.

My mate simply kept his shoulders rolled back and his head high, staring vacantly across the room. Like a statue. A shell of the man, the alpha, he was born to be.

I didn't know how much time had passed when servants—omegas, judging by their appearance and demeanor—began to clear away the table.

Beside me, Roman dabbed at his mouth with his napkin. "I'm so pleased you accepted my invitation, Alpha Alexi."

The visiting alpha didn't quite share Roman's easygoing attitude, though he managed a tight smile. "Seeing as you're known for your proclivity to raze rival packs to the ground, I'd have been fool to reject it."

"Father," his daughter, Victoria, reprimanded. She'd been staring at Roman with heart-eyes all evening. "He's only joking," she amended, casting Roman a demure smile that I knew would please him. "We've heard stories about your countless victories. It's an honor to be invited to visit the Intonat Nocte Pack."

A breath puffed from my nostrils in a poorly veiled scoff.

Roman, who'd been smiling at his potential Luna, narrowed his eyes in my direction. "Something to say, sweet Aria?"

I squared my shoulders, eyes flickering to Malik for half a beat before meeting Roman's again. Clearing my throat, I mustered a sickly sweet smile and shook my head. "Nothing at all. Only that I think you should tell us one of your many war stories. Since you've led the Intonat Nocte Pack to countless victories."

Roman's eyes turned to ice.

I'd done nothing wrong. Nothing except ask him to tell a story that I knew he didn't have.

He'd never been to war. He'd never won a victory. Emerson told me the truth herself. This so-called alpha sat up in this pack house and allowed Malik to risk his life instead. I wouldn't let him take credit for my mate's feats.

"It's poor taste to discuss battle at dinner," Roman clipped.

I felt Malik's gaze burning into me, but I daren't meet it out of fear that I might see disappointment on his features. Instead, Roman's attempted diversion increased my bravado, and I gestured toward the emptied table around us.

"Dinner is over." I batted my eyes in feigned innocence and shared a jovial smile with Victoria, who wasn't much older than me. "Come now. I'm sure Victoria wants to hear of your greatest victory."

Roman's mouth twisted into a sneer, and I could practically taste his fury in the air. It was hot and thick and putrid. His inability to control his features betrayed the extent of his deficiencies on the battlefield, and I reveled in the small victory.

I played a dangerous game and cocked a brow in his direction. "Well, Alpha?"

The sound of wood creaking split through the air, a result of Roman's claws digging into the chair's armrests. Violence brimmed in his eyes, and, for the briefest moment, fear swept over me.

Then, movement behind his chair caught my eye.

Malik had shifted closer. Only a sliver of gray remained in his good eye, his pupil a pit of black that warned of impending death. The muscles lining his shoulders were

stiff and trembling, like a ticking bomb one flinch from unleashing its wrath on the world. On his brother, should the need arise.

I saw the moment Roman realized it, too.

His eyes flickered to the side, acknowledging Malik's looming presence. Then, a slow smirk curled on his lips, leveled directly at me.

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“My greatest victory, sweet Aria—” He purred my name, and my gut curdled. “Lies in taming the beast you now call your mate.” My heart thundered in my chest, and he continued. “It lies in molding that twisted creature into something worthy of theIntonat NoctePack. Don’t you agree?”

Twisted creature. Beast.

Bile crept up my throat, and tension blanketed the room, so thick I could’ve choked on it. I hated this man. I didn’t know if I’d ever hated someone before. I couldn’t even claim to dislike more than a handful of people prior to arriving at theIntonat NoctePack. Hate did not come naturally to me.

But IhatedRoman. I wanted him to suffer.

Before I could open my mouth and damn myself further, Roman rose from his seat. He towered above me, and I resisted the instinctual urge to bow my head in reverence. I wouldn’t bow for this male. Thisfalsealpha.

“Malik,” Roman called, his voice like shards of ice. He didn’t look over his shoulder at his brother, eyes never leaving my face. “Take your mate home and teach her some manners.”

Finally released by his brother’s command, Malik came to my side in an instant. I pushed away from the table, nearly tipping my chair over in the process, to rejoin my mate. I managed to keep my arms from wrapping around his thick waist, but scarcely an inch separated our bodies once more.

My skin warmed where his hand pressed against the small of my back, seemingly just as eager to sweep me out of this Goddess-forsaken dining room. Before we made it halfway to the door, however, Roman's voice pierced the silence.

"I trust you'll...rectifyher poor behavior before our next meeting," Roman mused, cruelty laced in every word. "Otherwise, I'll be forced to take sweet Aria's discipline into myownhands."

Malik stiffened. His lips pulled into a silent snarl as he slowly turned to face his brother.

The room went still, and every occupant seemed to collectively hold their breath. Throughout the entire evening, Malik dipped his head and accepted Roman's abuse. But the moment Roman turned his threats towardme,Malik's control hung on a precarious thread.

The two males stared at each other, and several beats passed before I realized that they were having a silent conversation between them. And though I had no idea what was being said, a flicker of fear passed over Roman's features.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw two of Roman's guards shift closer to us, undoubtedly prepared to leap to their alpha's defense if the need arose. Malik could easily fight his brother and win, but if another opponent joined the fray...

I wrapped my hand around his wrist, hyper-aware of the pound of his pulse against my palm. His skin was hot—feverish.

"Malik," I whispered, tightening my grip. He didn't move. "Malik,please.Let's go home."

He released a ragged breath, the muscles in his jaw rippling beneath his scruff. For

several long moments, he held his brother's gaze, before, at last, he took a backward step toward the exit. Then another. I trailed after him. He never turned his back on Roman until we entered the empty hallway.

As soon as we were out of the pack house and on the shadowed path away from the monstrous structure, he pulled his arm out of my grasp, only to tug me into his chest in an impassioned embrace. I gasped but recovered quickly, standing on my toes to wrap my arms around his neck.

"I'm sorry," I murmured against his chest, resting my forehead against the hollow between his pectorals. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have pushed him. I was just so angry?—"

Malik silenced me with a hand in my hair, gently tugging on the strands at the base of my neck to coax my head backward, away from his chest. I complied, tipping my chin up so that I might look in his eyes.

The pupil in his good eye dilated until the gray became the darkest shade of graphite. His gaze trickled to my mouth, then back to my eyes again. His heart still thundered against his ribcage, practically vibrating into my own chest, and I sensed that he wanted—needed—to kiss me again.

Our kiss before dinner had been short. Truthfully, Malik pulled away before I truly knew what was happening, but that didn't take away from the beauty of it. In fact, that small, tender peck meant more to me than I could've ever put to words.

Now though, Malik's gaze held a certain ferocity that warned of brimming need and lapsing control. If he kissed me now, it wouldn't be gentle. And, Goddess, I didn't want gentle.

He shifted forward, our breaths mingling, and I held painstakingly still to allow him to

take the lead. Even so, my eyes roamed to his mouth as he bent closer. His tongue darted out to wet his lips, and the look on his face was some combination of fervent lust and uncertainty. Anticipation curled into a tight ball in my belly. Flames spread through my veins, sending warmth to my core.

When his mouth met mine, I nearly moaned in relief.

He paused, our lips pressed hesitantly against one another's. I half-expected him to pull away again, but he pressed his lips firmly against mine. My eyes fell closed, and, this time, I couldn't contain the soft, breathless noise that bubbled up my throat.

That only encouraged him. His grip on my hair tightened, fisting my locks to tilt my head back and ease his access to my lips. His lips were impossibly soft, with a small ridge where the bottom of his scar met the corner of his mouth.

Malik experimented. He kissed me firm and deep, then withdrew to brush against my bottom lip before pressing again.

I clutched at his shirt, my fingers curling into the fabric and scraping against his muscled chest to draw him closer. My movements must've sparked something in him, for his tongue boldly swept across the seam of my lips. They opened on instinct.

His tongue breached my mouth in a tentative stroke, and a spark of electricity shot straight between my legs. I clamped them together to satiate the sudden warmth.

I exhaled, passing breath from my mouth to his as I surrendered to his exploration. Though I didn't have experience, my body knew what to do in response to every touch. My own tongue tangled with his, meeting every thrust and sweep in a sinful, erotic dance. I wanted to weep from happiness. From the sheer rightness of this moment.

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When he pulled away, our breaths came in ragged pants. Our chests expanded and contracted in rapid gasps, and I was faintly certain I could feel his erection, thick and long, pressing into my stomach.

Oh Goddess. I swayed forward, pressing my hips tighter against his hard body. It took no small amount of effort to refrain from wiggling in search of friction between my legs.

We were outside. A stone's throw away from the pack house and countless shifters finishing their dinner party.

“Malik—” His name was a breathless plea. “Take me back to the cottage.”

16

MALIK

Take me back to the cottage.

My blood roared. The adrenaline that had been coursing through my veins since the damned dinner party, born of anger and fear, pulsed anew.

Take me back to the cottage. It was a quiet, firm plea.

Need pooled behind those sky eyes, undoubtedly mirrored in my own gaze. My chest heaved, gulping to draw air into my burning lungs. I'd forgotten to breathe, too transfixed by the taste of my little dove.

I dipped my chin and stooped to scoop Aria into my arms, one slipping beneath her bent legs and the other cradling her back.

Her arms wrapped around my neck, the insides of her forearms grazing the scarred tissue at my throat, but I didn't withdraw. The skin prickled at the unnatural sensation of another's touch, but I took a steadying breath and focused on the warmth of her skin instead.

I carried her along the path, nerves and anticipation curling low in my abdomen with every step I took closer to our home.

I had no experience with...this. I'd never taken a female into my bed. I'd relieved myself with my fist, of course, but I didn't know the first thing about pleasuring another. Apprehension licked down my spine at the prospect of disappointing my mate.

Of course, I'd never kissed anyone before, either, yet my body seemed to innately know what to do. I studied Aria's reactions, too. The little noises in her throat. The way her lips parted and her fingers tightened on my shirt when I did something she enjoyed. When the time came, I decided I would allow her reactions and instinct to guide me once again.

We arrived at the cottage a few minutes later. I gently placed Aria on her feet in the kitchen and took a small step backward.

Now, standing face to face with my little dove, I realized that the anger-fueled passion from minutes ago had settled, though insatiable lust still churned in my groin. I still wanted her, but my bravery dwindled with the rage.

She stared up at me expectantly, her fleshy bottom lip clasped between her teeth. Her skin was flushed, practically glowing in the light from the nearly full moon through

the window. Goddess, she was perfect.

Suddenly, I felt terribly inadequate. I lowered my head, allowing my long hair to fall over the ruined side of my face, as if that might make her forget that I looked monstrous in comparison to her.

A frown formed on her forehead in response, and she took a small step forward. “Don’t hide from me, Malik. Please...”

The breath caught in my throat, and I froze.

She took another step closer, then another, until she stood directly in front of me. Our chests nearly brushed.

One of Aria’s hands landed on my chest, but the other found my unscarred cheek. She cupped the side of my face, finger trailing over my scruff and stroking my jawline. Electricity sparked wherever her touch went.

“I think you’re beautiful,” she whispered, her voice filled with the reverence of an acolyte worshipping her god. “Every part of you. So, please, don’t hide from me.”

Then, she did it. The hand resting on my chest drifted upward. She moved with painstaking caution, giving me every opportunity to pull back as her fingers hovered centimeters away from my twisted scars.

“Do you want me to stop?”

My heart stopped. Alarm bells blared in my head. The voice in the back of my head, the one I’d relied on to survive for countless years, shouted at me to defend myself. But I didn’t. I steeled myself against the rising panic and shook my head.

No.I didn't want her to stop.

Tears glistened across the surface of her eyes as I placed my trust in her delicate little fingers.

And when her fingertips brushed against my ruined flesh, there was no pain. No prickling. Only Aria's soft touch and the warmth it left in its wake.

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She traced the ridge that started at my eyebrow and followed it over my blind eye. I shuddered and surprised myself by pressing my cheek into her palm, as if I'd deprived myself of human contact for too long, and now I couldn't get enough of it.

“Malik?”

I opened my eyes to find her smiling up at me, a single tear trailing down her rounded cheek, disappearing at the corner of her lips.

“Should we...” Splotches of color tainted her skin, and her confidence wavered, just for a moment. “Would you like to take me to the bedroom?”

My eyes widened, and I very nearly fell to my knees for love of this woman.

Still, she'd shown me that she valued communication, and there was one thing I needed Aria to know before we started down this path. I pulled away from her dotting hands and found the notepad on the kitchen counter.

My handwriting appeared even messier than usual, the black ink smearing and bleeding through the paper as my fingers trembled. More than once, I had to cross out my writing and start again. Heat crept up my neck. Somehow, it felt more humiliating to write the words than it would to speak them out loud.

I don't want to disappoint

I'm not experienced with

I've never done this before.

I handed the notepad to Aria and watched while she read the simple sentence like my life depended on it.

Her eyebrows rose, as if she was surprised by my admission. Then, a small smile pulled on her lips. Without hesitating, she took the pen and scrawled a reply.

I haven't either. How about we start slow and learn together?

I looked up from the notepad, and our eyes locked. Palpable emotion passed between us, and I felt something I'd never experienced before. Safe.

I felt safe with Aria. Safe from judgment. Safe from hurt. Safe from myself.

I allowed the sensation to wash over me. I drank it in. Memorized it and ingrained it in my mind so as never to forget. So that the next time the darkness threatened to creep in, I'd remember it—remember her—and know that I would be okay.

ARIA

Without further hesitation, Malik set the notebook aside and took my hand.

My breaths came fast, never pulling enough air into my lungs, which only made my heartbeat escalate. He could undoubtedly hear it above our footsteps on the wooden floor, carrying us to the bedroom. But I wasn't alone in my nerves. We were both novices when it came to this.

I'd been shocked when I first read Malik's words, explaining that he'd never slept with another. But as soon as my initial surprise faded, joy took its place. Knowing that I'd be the only one to be with him in such an intimate way...

It meant more to me than he would ever know.

When we arrived, I kept our hands connected, robbing him of the opportunity to pull away. I perched on the edge of the mattress and urged him to sit down beside me. The bed dipped beneath his substantial weight.

Once again, we were left staring at one another with a strange mixture of hesitation and excitement sizzling between us. This wasn't like the movies or the romance novels that I'd devoured throughout my adolescence. We weren't clawing at each other's clothes with a sweeping soundtrack orchestrating every choreographed move.

This was real. It was new and thrilling and awkward, and I wouldn't change it for the world.

Sensing that he might need a little prompting, I cleared my throat and rotated my shoulders, giving Malik my back. "Help me unzip?"

I stared at a spot on the floor, though every fiber in my body honed in on the sound of Malik shifting behind me. Slowly, his fingers found the zipper at the back of my dress. With more gentleness than a man of his size seemed capable of, he tugged the zipper down.

The fabric loosened, one strap falling away from my shoulder. The other followed a second later, leaving the bodice in a puddle of fabric at my waist. My nipples hardened at the sudden exposure, and goosebumps peppered my skin.

Swallowing, I turned to face Malik once again. His eyes were wide. His pupil dilated as he stared at my bare breasts.

I knew he'd seen countless naked women before, just as I'd seen naked men. Nudity was commonplace in a pack of shifters. But this was different. My body sang under

his scrutiny. Pure, unadulterated lust clouded Malik's gaze, and it made me bold.

"You can touch me," I whispered, rolling my shoulders back to accentuate the modest globes on my chest.

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Malik's breathing hitched, but, like a man under a spell, he lifted a hand to one of my breasts and cupped it. Heat seeped into me where our skin touched, and my breasts grew heavy and aching in an instant. A deep throb pulsed between my legs.

Soon, his other hand fit overtop the other side of my chest, his callouses scraping the sensitive skin as he squeezed each mound. The sensation shot straight to my sex.

Malik's lips parted, his tongue darting out to wet their surface. One of his thumbs circled my nipple, then he pinched the sensitive bud and I gasped.

He pulled back like I'd burned him, concern etched across his features. His brows pulled together in a silent question.

Embarrassment flamed my cheeks, and I shook my head with a small laugh. "I'm sorry. It felt good."

Too good. In fact, 'good' didn't even begin to cover it.

One corner of Malik's mouth curled into a smile, and he circled my nipple again. The rosy peak pebbled in response to his touch, and I bit the inside of my cheek as a rivulet of electricity trickled all the way to the base of my spine.

A sudden need to feel more than just his hands on my breasts gripped me, and the words spilled from my mouth before I could stop them. I didn't know where my sudden confidence blossomed from.

"You can kiss me there, too."

His eyes flared, and I saw the moment his own confidence overcame his doubts. Something in my beautiful, broken mate shifted, as if he'd simply been waiting for my permission, and he nudged me backward on the bed, laying me on the mattress and climbing over my body.

He pinned me beneath him, and his mouth found my breasts. I gasped as his tongue tested and tasted one nipple, then the next. His lips latched over the painfully taut nub, hot and wet, and my legs spread of their own accord.

Malik settled into the crevice that I created for him, his lower abdomen pressed against the hollow between my legs. I couldn't help it when my hips thrust upward into him, chasing relief for the tightness building within.

He withdrew from my breasts just long enough to look up at me, his eyes dark and wild, and I knew some combination of ecstasy and agony was written across my features. Like he knew exactly what I needed, he shifted his weight forward and brought his mouth to mine, simultaneously aligning our hips.

His erection pressed into me, hard and thick through the fabric of his jeans and my flimsy dress. I wiggled my hips until the long rod parted my lower lips, and then I thrust my hips against him again.

He slid against my sex, and the rub of his jeans felt like heaven against the nub at the apex of my thighs.

This time, Malik puffed a harsh gasp into my mouth, and I swallowed it down. If his vocal cords weren't ruined, I guessed the exhalation might've sounded like a moan, and I smiled at that knowledge.

He pulled away from our kiss, one elbow braced beside my head to allow him to hover above me, and watched me with hesitation in his gaze. He rolled his hips into

me once, and flames leapt from my aching center.

“Yes,” I begged, wiggling beneath him to seek that illusive friction. “Yes, just like that.”

With my confirmation, Malik resumed our kiss. He rolled his hips in time with the thrust of his tongue into my mouth. Whether he realized it or not, his erection rubbed tantalizing circles around my clitoris, and pleasure skittered through my body.

Soft, breathy moans and whimpers slipped from my throat, and he adjusted his movements according to my reactions, like he intimately knew just what I needed. The knowledge that only he could elicit such a response from my body sent another great wave of arousal straight to my core.

My clit began to tingle and swell with warmth, and my entire being tightened and tightened and?—

“Oh!” I cried, breaking free from his mouth as release barreled through me.

My back arched off the bed, causing my stiff nipples to rub against his chest. Bolts of arousal shot straight to my core, extending my orgasm, as Malik’s thrusts turned erratic and rough.

Soft bursts of air came from his mouth, and he shuddered. His movements became sloppy, until he went still above me and his breathing turned ragged. When I opened my eyes, it was to find Malik already staring down at me, awe scribbled over his handsome features.

I was faintly aware of a warm wetness between my legs, where our still-clothed bodies ground tight against one another’s. Malik stiffened.

His brow furrowed, and he shifted away from me, but not before I felt a new sort of hardness at the seam of his jeans. As if the blood coursing through his anatomy did not ease with his release, but instead increased—tenfold.

Splotches of color covered his cheeks, and he pushed away from the mattress, spinning away from me as if to preserve his modesty. After what we just did, I couldn't understand why.

“Malik?” I panted his name and propped myself onto an elbow, still coming down from my high.

He didn't respond. Instead, he kept his back to me and retreated into the bathroom, shutting the door behind him with a resounding thud and leaving me alone.

Alone, half-dressed, and sated, yet more confused than ever.

17

MALIK

I came. In my pants.

I came in my pants.

I might not have been experienced when it came to physical relationships, but I knew enough. Prematurely spilling into your jeans wasn't something to take pride in. That wasn't what made me flee, though.

After those first bolts of pleasure shot through the base of my spine, my body didn't...calm.

It happened in tandem with my release. There was absolute, blinding ecstasy as my cock rubbed mercilessly against Aria's center through our clothing, but the blood pumping through my erection did not ease. It gathered at the base, swelling, swelling, swelling...

It was a feat of anatomy I'd never experienced before when I chased relief with my own fist. A strange bulb at the base of my penis that throbbed and pulsed for nearly half an hour before it began to recede. In that time, I stood in the shower, hunched over with cold water blasting my back, and any contact with my painfully erect cock caused more white seed to shoot from my tip.

It was called knotting, I knew. I'd heard stories—legends, really—about the natural

phenomenon.

It occurred only in alphas who were coupling with their fated mates. A gland at the base of their penis would swell with blood seconds before release, and, at the same time, the female's internal walls were supposed to clamp down. Theoretically, the anatomical changes would lock the couple in position for near-on thirty minutes, drastically improving chances of impregnation.

As my knot retreated and I regained control over my body, humiliation washed over me. It'd happened after rubbing against Aria, fully-clothed, for less than five minutes...

By the time I returned to the bedroom, she'd dressed in one of my t-shirts and pulled the sheets up to her neck, her body still. I couldn't tell from her breathing whether she was truly sleeping, so I merely crawled into bed beside her and willed the darkness to take me.

Now, days later, I'd scarcely had time to see Aria, let alone sit down with her long enough to explain on a pad of paper why I fled.

Roman kept me busy, preparing for next quarter's patrol through the territory. It was a tedious, long journey that ensured every subset of the In-tonat Nocte Pack paid their taxes and remained loyal to Roman. My brother sent me because my appearance tended to dissuade any dissonance.

All of my preparations, however, came to a halt on the night of the full moon.

Even if I'd wanted to continue working, the moon's pull wreaked havoc on my body and mind, rendering me angry and hot and dangerously distracted. Most full moons, Estelle offered me a tonic to ease the edge and I'd shut myself away. It was safer for everyone—myself included.

Tonight, I returned to the center of our territory from a guard shift as dusk broke, fully intent on returning to my cottage before the night's festivities were underway. Aria, I knew, planned on spending the evening with Estelle in the clinic, helping to patch up the injured and delivering tonics that would protect unmated pairings from conceiving.

As I emerged from the dense forest, it became apparent that the celebration began early this year.

Shifters—male and female, beast and human—congregated in the expansive clearing at the front of the pack house. Many ate and drank, laughing and conversing with one another over picnic blankets. Others had already abandoned all attempts at civility, their massive wolves rutting and skirmishing with no care for their surroundings.

I huffed, water vapor puffing from my wolf's snout, and turned my gaze to the rising moon. The hair on the scruff of my neck bristled, and my blood warmed in an instant. I shuddered, opting to shift back into my human form before the moon's influence dug its claws into me.

My bones popped, fur morphing into skin. Soon, I stood on my feet, naked and painfully aware of my semi-erect cock jutting out from my groin—an unfortunate consequence of the full moon, at least until I got Estelle's tonic in my veins.

I started toward the outbuilding where I'd left my clothing in a stall, but a familiar voice stopped me in my tracks.

“Brother!” Roman shouted, his voice filled with an unnatural dose of joy.

My eyes snapped up, landing on my brother across the clearing. Unsurprisingly, he lounged naked on a crimson rug that must've been a few centuries old. A female, I recognized her as one of the caretakers of the pack's pups, sat atop his hips, equally

bare.

She rocked back and forth on his groin, taking him deep and rubbing herself against his pubic bone, sweat dripping down her glowing dark skin. Her head tilted back, eyes cast toward the moon. Her breasts bounced with her movements, and my mind automatically conjured memories of Aria beneath me, her rosy, swollen nipples in my mouth...

Blood rushed to my cock.

While the woman worked, Roman's eyes remained on me. He propped himself up on an elbow, and a genuine smile played on his lips. He must've been drunk.

"Come here, brother!" he called, his voice a strange mix of a request and an order. "I need to speak to you."

I frowned. Speaking to Roman while he fucked a woman was among the last things I wanted to do, especially when alcohol and nature alike warped his mind. Even so, I ground my teeth and approached the pair like a compliant servant.

The female—Callie, if I remembered correctly—watched me with half-lidded eyes, her lips parted as she gasped for breath. She never ceased riding Roman's cock, though her gaze drank me in, and I made a conscious effort to avoid meeting it.

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What? I demanded to Roman through our mind-link.

Roman's smile grew, and he sat up a bit taller on the rug. Red marks lined his chest and neck, and I inhaled to find the scents of several females covering his body. Callie wasn't his first of the night, nor would she be his last.

"No need to be rude," he chided, though his words lacked their usual malice. "I only wanted to ask where Aria is this evening. I was surprised to see you alone."

You were the one to assign me to patrol this evening, I reminded him. Callie began whimpering, her rocking becoming fervent and over exaggerated. I was about to head home.

"Oh, yes." Roman frowned, as if he'd forgotten his own orders. "I suppose I cannot tempt you to bring beautiful Aria out to join us?"

I rubbed at the back of my neck, heat rising to my cheeks as Callie rode out her orgasm. Aria is working at the clinic tonight.

Roman hummed, pushing Callie off of him. She fell into a lump of sensual curves and glowing skin on the rug, sated.

"That's too bad..." Roman drawled, then his eyes flickered to my groin and a devious grin pulled on his lips. He nodded toward my erection, which had shamefully grown to its full length in the span of a few minutes. "It looks like you'd prefer it if she was here."

Is that all you wanted to discuss? I demanded, the words clipped.

“Of course, I’d offer you Callie,” Roman waved a dismissive hand at the female behind him. “But I’ve heard that once you’ve fucked your fated mate, no other cunt can compare.”

I stiffened. Aria and I hadn’t consummated our bond, but the thought of mounting another female still caused nausea to roil through me. I didn’t want another, even though my damned erection pulsed in response.

Roman caught the movement, and that wicked grin grew. “Or, perhaps I’m wrong... Is it true that you’ve still yet to claim your mate, brother? I always figured you’d remained celibate as a matter of principle.” He chuckled, as if genuinely amused by the situation. “Now that you’ve found your mate and failed to fuck her, I’m beginning to think that you don’t know how!”

Flames licked up my neck, clouding my cheeks in red humiliation. His words, however cruel, weren’t so far away from the truth. Hot shame poured over me like a vat of oil, and I prepared to turn on my heel to stalk away, finished with the conversation.

But Callie, who’d seemingly recovered from her climax, swatted at Roman’s shoulder and sent him a pointed glare.

“Don’t laugh,” she hissed, then turned her attention back toward me.

She pushed to her feet and brushed a braid over her shoulder. Her smooth, long legs unfolded beneath her as she stepped over Roman’s horizontal form and closed the distance between us.

“Maybe he just wants a bit of practice,” she purred, lust pooling in her dark brown

eyes. The scent of her arousal consumed me, leaking from her glistening sex, and my heart began to thunder in my chest.

I shook my head.No.

Callie only smiled, slowing her approach but not ending it.Are you sure?Her voice, low and husky, echoed in my ear.I could help you... No one would have to know.

Shifting a step backward, dread curled low in my gut. Because, no matter how much my heart and mind screamedno,my traitorous body was at the mercy of the full moon, and the self-control that I prided myself on felt dangerously close to snapping.

Roman laughed, though I barely heard it over the pounding between my ears. “Oh, come on, brother. I’m sure Aria will appreciate it if you have a bit of experience.” He winked. “You wouldn’t want to fumble around like a damned fool and risk disappointing her, would you?”

No, I certainly didn’t want to disappoint Aria...

To be honest, I’ve always had a bit of a crush on you, Malik,Callie cooed in my mind, coming to a stop directly in front of me. Her breasts almost brushed against my chest.I think a lot of females do...

Alarm bells blared in my head. My breath came in ragged pants.

I have a mate,I countered, shaking my head to clear away the fog. I took another step back, but Callie followed me. I wasn’t sure if my words even reached her, or if she’d heard me and chose to ignore my refusal.

Her hand bridged the space between us, and my stomach clenched when her fingers hovered centimeters from my erection. I prepared to swat her away, the only warning

she would receive before I made a dangerous show of my refusal.

Then I heard it. That soft, beautiful voice that had quickly become my favorite sound in the world. Thick with heartache and betrayal.

“M-Malik?”

18

ARIA

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:13 am

Estelle sent me on an errand to the pack house to distribute one last batch of contraceptive tonic. I kept my head low, careful to avoid meeting the gazes of any of the shifters running amuck in the clearing. For the first time in my life, I truly understood why my father kept me hidden away during the full moons.

Males and females tangled together on the expansive lawn, bonfires illuminating the masses of skin and fur. Some ate and drank. Others had abandoned any attempt at civility and chose to embrace their wild, primal sides.

Grunts and gasps and shouts filled the air, a sinful cacophony that made me eager to return to the clinic. Or, better yet, Malik's cottage. I'd been working all day, and the moon's influence created a newfound desire to be with my mate tonight.

I wanted to clear away the shadow that had been hanging over us for the last few days. In fact, I had plans for us that involved a home-cooked dinner, a game of checkers that Emerson and I found in a forgotten cabinet of the pack house, and newly-acquired scissors for a haircut, if I could manage to convince Malik to let me trim his mane. For the first time in days, excitement fueled my steps as time ticked closer and closer to the moment when I could see Malik again.

I'd nearly reached the castle when the hair on the back of my neck stood tall, and instinct told me to look up. My gaze immediately landed on them.

On him.

I recognized Malik's back in an instant. He stood taller than any other male in the pack, and my heart spiked at the sight of his bare backside.

A small frown etched across my features. He'd left me a note in the cottage that he'd been tasked with a patrol this evening and, upon returning, planned to seek refuge in the cottage for the remainder of the evening.

I narrowed my eyes, surprised to find him in the fray of the celebrations, and standing in front of Roman, no less. Perhaps Malik simply needed to report to his brother before he could retire for the night?

And yet, as I took another step closer, I realized that the two males were not alone.

A pair of feet stood inches away from my mate. Long, muscled legs bled into full, luscious hips. Not a strand of hair covered her pubic bone, though glistening wetness leaked from between her thighs. Her breasts, large and rounded, were topped with dark, pebbled nipples that strained toward Malik. And her hand...

My heart fell to the pit of my stomach.

This female reached for Malik. Her fingers closed in on his manhood. His aroused manhood.

"M-Malik?" I whispered, his name a broken whisper on my lips.

He spun to face me, wrenching away from the dark-haired beauty in the process. She nearly stumbled backward as his shoulder caught her square in the chest, but I'd already seen them together. The damage had been done.

Wild desperation shone in his gaze, and his mouth gaped open like he attempted to call my name. No sound came out of his ruined throat. Even if he could speak, I wasn't sure I'd be able to hear him above the pounding in my head.

Pain, unlike anything I'd ever experienced before, pierced my chest. It tore through

me, ripping away skin and cracking ribs, shooting straight for the organ struggling to pump blood to my veins.

I couldn't breathe. Couldn't think.

Malik took a step toward me, but I took an immediate step backward.

I could smell him. The scent of his arousal. It mingled with the overbearing stench of sex in the clearing.

Nausea crept up my throat.

"N-No," I whispered, shaking my head, not quite willing to believe it. I took another step backward, and the vials of contraceptive tonics that I'd been carrying fell to the ground at my feet.

Malik advanced toward me, his eye wide and pleading.

Somewhere in the background, I heard Roman's boisterous laughter, and hatred burned through me. While my heart ripped itself to pieces, this so-called alphalaughed.

I couldn't take it any longer. I turned and ran.

I ran as fast as my feet would carry me, allowing the full moon's rays to pour over me. To fuel me.

Somewhere along the way, my footsteps transformed into my wolf's paws thundering against the forest floor, carrying me away from the Intonat Noctepack house. Away from Malik.

My entire being ached.

I knew what I saw. My mate with another female, her fingers hovering centimeters from his erection, and he didn't stop her.

Of course, buried deep beneath the heartbreak clouding over my soul, I knew that there could've been another explanation. The full moon changed our kind. He still could've refused her. If I'd given him one more second, he might've stopped her. But I didn't, andhedidn't.

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Tree limbs clawed at my silver coat. Dirt flew where my claws dug into the damp earth. I allowed instinct to guide me through the forest, tearing through the unknown with abandon. I didn't care that any number of dangers might be lurking in the shadows. I threw caution to the wind and ran.

I ran until my muscles strained and my lungs screamed. My flanks expanded and contracted, and flecks of blood streaked across my fur where the undergrowth cut against my legs.

I ran until I couldn't any longer, collapsing into an exhausted heap at the first clearing I found. Tall grass surrounded the clearing, damp and vibrant green, indicating a nearby water source, though I did not possess the willpower to quench my thirst.

Curling into a tight ball, I clamped my eyes shut and allowed soft whimpers to rise from my throat. They shifted into silent sobs as I morphed back into my human form, no longer possessing the strength or focus to remain a wolf.

Salty tears plowed paths through the mud caked on my cheeks, the cold ground a shock to my system.

Somewhere behind the frantic pounding at my temple and my shallow, shaking breaths, I heard heavy footsteps. They practically vibrated through the forest floor, becoming louder and more forceful with every heartbeat.

I didn't have it in me to be frightened. I knew, deep in my core, that Malik had followed me.

He arrived moments later, but I refused to turn to face him and gave him my back. He puffed from the strain of the chase, though the rest of the world went silent and still at his arrival.

Despite the heartbreak ripping through me, every instinct told me to scurry to his side. My shoulders trembled, and I folded further into myself instead.

A subtle crack of bone sounded behind me, and I knew he'd abandoned his wolf body in exchange for his human. Lighter footsteps behind me confirmed it.

He rounded where I lay, coming to crouch in front of me. The moonlight cast a glow on his sorrowful features, and I clamped my eyes shut to avoid witnessing the regret scrawled across his gaze.

The undergrowth crunched, and I felt the heat of Malik's big body as he lay beside me. My skin burned where he touched my shoulder, and I stiffened against his attempt to pull me into his front.

"Please, don't," I whispered, my voice a shell of its former self.

He ceased in an instant, and the world went quiet around us. After several long moments of silence, I dared to open my eyes. A broken man filled my line of sight.

Malik sat on his knees before me, head bowed low over his shoulders. His hands fell limp at his sides. The intensity of his sorrow leaked off of him in waves, and physical pain punctured through my chest at the sight.

In spite of the anger and heartache and humiliation churning inside of me... It killed me to see him hurt.

With a sniffle, I gingerly pushed up. My knees folded neatly beneath me, nearly

touching Malik's own as we faced on another.

I took a moment to inhale deep, searching for the scent of her on his body. Only Malik—tobacco and mint and musk—filled my lungs, and I nearly sobbed in relief. He hadn't let her touch him, after all.

His head remained bowed, but I felt the moment his gaze flickered to meet me in the dark. A deep, ragged breath shuddered from his mouth.

Then, he prostrated himself before me. He bent at the hips, lowering himself to the ground like a reverent acolyte submitting to the Moon Goddess. Head bowed to the dirt and mud, he extended a single hand to grasp one of mine, squeezing tight the moment our fingers locked.

He bowed to me.

Though he couldn't speak the words aloud, I felt his apology more than verbal sentiments could ever convey. I felt the depths of his sorrow, pulsing nearly as steadily as his devotion.

"Malik?" I whispered, leaning forward to stroke his hair.

He didn't look up. He remained steadfast in his submission, and I squeezed his hand thrice.

"Look at me, Malik," I requested, swallowing the thick lump of emotion in my throat.

He heeded my wish, muscles rippling beneath scarred, sweat-slicked skin as he rose. We faced one another again, our kneecaps pressed together and our hands united between us. Still, too much space separated our bodies.

My gaze slid down his impressive form. Bathed in the full moon's light, he appeared every bit the magnificent warrior I'd considered him on the first evening we met. Mountainous muscles covered his chest, dipping into cut ridges on his abdomen. Thick thighs bent in the mud, and his manhood, flaccid now, pulsed beneath my scrutiny.

Even so, Malik's head stayed bowed in shame.

In that moment, I knew what I needed. What he needed, too.

Taking a shaky breath, I rose onto my knees. Malik's gaze snapped up the moment I crawled onto his lap, spreading my legs wide to accommodate his thighs between them. I steadied myself with both hands on his chest and met his gaze, my eyes still stinging with tears.

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One of my hands dared to creep up his chest, coming to rest on the scarred half of his face. My fingers soothed the warped, puffy skin bisecting his cheek. He shuddered beneath my touch.

“Claim me. For the Moon Goddess and the world to see,” I whispered, aligning our hips. “I need to know that I am yours.”

19

ARIA

It surprised me how quickly Malik’s sorrowful demeanor shifted as soon as the request slipped from my lips.

His pupil dilated, his unscarred eye turning more black than gray as he held my gaze. He went still beneath me, heart thundering like it might burst through his chest, and I felt him harden against my seam—a hot, steel-like rod that grew larger and larger with every passing second.

Still, he didn’t move. He seemed to search for something, and, though he couldn’t speak the words aloud, somehow I knew exactly what he needed. Confirmation.

I gave it to him with the soft stroke of my fingertips against his cheek. With my breath that fanned against his neck, just beneath his ruined jugular, as I drew the tip of my nose to the base of his throat.

His chest heaved with every inhalation, and his hands clamped down on my hips with

enough force to bruise. He didn't draw me closer or drag me against his erection. Instead, he merely held me in place, as if reassuring himself that I wouldn't hurt him.

My nose stopped where his scent, masculine and musky and familiar, became the most potent. There, I pressed an indulgent kiss to his flesh, savoring the vibrant pulse beneath my lips.

Malik shuddered, and instinct told me that this was the spot.

A barely-there ache formed in my gums as my canine teeth expanded, my body knowing what to do in spite of my inexperience. My tongue darted out to taste his salty skin, preparing the skin to take my bite.

I'd mark him first—claim him as my own—then, Goddess willing, he would do the same for me. But that meant nothing if we didn't complete the other part of the mating ritual.

My attention fell to the warmth dripping between my legs. It should have concerned me how quickly my body reacted to him. How it immediately forgot the heartache and pain that consumed it mere minutes ago, favoring lust and hunger instead.

The scene in front of the pack house was a mere blip in my memory, now. It didn't matter. Not anymore. Not with this magnificent male beneath me, trembling as I pressed another kiss to the sensitive flesh at the base of his throat, pulling the skin into my mouth, teasing.

Reason slipped away as heat pulsed through my blood. I felt feverish. Dizzy. Bursting with need to be filled, consumed, broken, healed?—

My canines descended into his neck, puncturing the thin veil of skin. Malik's blood seeped from the wound, and the coppery tang filled my mouth as I dug deeper.

A low raspy breath vibrated from his chest, his version of a groan, and it emboldened me. One of my hands hiked up to his shoulder, while the other tangled in his hair. I moaned into his neck, biting harder out of sheer desperation to claim this male as mine.

My mate. My fated partner. Mine.

His hands found my backside, digging into the fleshy muscle and lifting me higher, granting me better access to his neck.

“Malik,” I gasped against his skin, my canines retreating from the neat holes they dug. Rivulets of blood dripped from the wound, and I couldn’t fight the primitive urge to lap up the precious liquid, soothing the red skin with my tongue and lips.

No longer able to control himself, his hips bucked once beneath me. I hovered just out of reach. The mark and its effects would only become permanent if we consummated our union—quickly.

Something wet and urgent burst through my core, and I pulled my mouth away from his neck, lips stained by blood, and kissed him. He took me into his mouth in an instant, all hesitation forgotten.

Our tongues tangled, teeth clashing as I clung to him like I’d die if we separated. We’d never kissed like this before, and it felt good. So impossibly, beautifully good. So mind-numbingly perfect that I found myself lowering onto his hips again in search of relief.

I didn’t make it far. “Oh.”

As soon as I pressed down, my sex brushed against Malik’s engorged head. The bulbous tip slid between my folds until it notched directly beneath my opening. Only

then did I truly realize the extent of my arousal.

I lowered an inch, and he easily breached my center. The slick wet welcomed him in, daring to suck him deeper. I paused, my thighs straining to hold myself up while every fiber in my body screamed at me to sink onto him.

We were both panting when I withdrew from the kiss.

Malik's eyes flared wild, his jaw clamped like it took every ounce of strength to control himself. We held each other's gazes for one long moment, exchanging the same breath. The dark hair spanning his chest tickled my breasts with each ragged exhale.

His grip on my hips tightened, and I knew for a fact that there'd be handprints decorating my flesh in the morning. Without looking away from me, he guided my hips downward, and I took another half-inch.

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I felt the first hint of a stretch. Not painful. Not even uncomfortable. But stretched.

Malik stiffened. He trembled beneath me, but he didn't push me further onto his erection. Instead, he waited, a silent question in his eyes.

I nodded in response, a ravenous, uninhibited confirmation. "Yes. Do it. Please. I need?—"

Words failed me as, without preamble, Malik brought me down on him.

I cried out, an initial burning sensation shooting through me at the abrupt intrusion. My opening complained the most, like it took the brunt of accommodating my mate's sheer size and girth, but, as seconds passed, the pain dissipated.

A strained, choked sound ripped from Malik's chest as he bottomed out inside of me, and my eyes fluttered open to find him staring at the spot where our bodies joined, enraptured.

I followed his gaze, peering between our bodies. My blonde curls pressed tight against the dark hair at his base, obscuring the view of his cock buried deep. I could vaguely see where my lips spread and my clitoris rubbed against his pubic bone, but not an inch separated us. Not anymore.

I expected more pain. I expected tears to be springing from the corners of my eyes, my virgin sex screaming for reprieve. But any pain had already faded into the smallest twinge of discomfort, leaving a heady sense of fullness in its wake.

I shouldn't have been surprised. We were made for one another, after all. That meant biologically as well. We fit.

My body accepted him like it welcomed back a long lost part of itself. Where I was wet and pliant, Malik was hard and unyielding. I molded around him, our bodies becoming one.

His breaths came shallow, his thighs twitching beneath me as if fighting against the urge to ratchet into me from below. I wanted him to. Though, when I looked up to his face, his eyes were closed, collecting himself.

Desperate for a bit of friction, I rotated my hips, grinding against his hard pubic bone. Little sparks of pleasure erupted at my clit, only to come to an abrupt halt when his hands landed on my waist, halting my movements.

"Please," I pleaded. A desperate whimper bubbled from my chest when I tried moving again, but he held firm in his resistance.

Malik answered me by peppering gentle, doting kisses to my mouth and jawline, nibbling at my earlobe before descending down my neck. Utterly consumed by the feeling of him inside of me, I didn't understand the reason for his resistance until he sucked on the hollow of my neck.

He wanted to mark me.

Blood flooded my engorged clitoris as his teeth dragged over the sensitive flesh between my collarbone and ear. My head fell to the side, offering him unimpeded access. Yes, yes, yes, yes?—

His sharp canines pierced through my skin's barrier. They were long, descending deep into my bloodstream until hot blood poured from the wound, falling in rivers

down my breasts and abdomen. But, just as when he'd first pushed inside my sex, the immediate shot of pain faded away into nothingness as his canines found purchase.

Pleasure—pure, unadulterated pleasure—churned throughout my body, leaving no corner untouched. It was everything I'd ever imagined, yet completely unfathomable in the same breath.

With his canines marking my neck and his cock buried to the hilt, the first twitches of an orgasm began to build at the base of my spine, hard and sudden. "I'm going to—Goddess!"

My back arched as my core began to spasm, and I writhed against his cock as my orgasm unleashed inside of me. I forgot how to breathe—how to think—as my entire body swelled and burst, then swelled again. I came undone. And undone. And undone.

Somewhere in the midst of my ecstasy, Malik released his claiming hold on my neck and adjusted our bodies' positions until my back pressed into the cold ground. He laid on top of me, my thighs parting to accommodate his hips as his weight pressed into me. Then, as the aftershocks pulsed through my body and skittered down my spine, I heard it.

I heard him.

Deep and rumbling and unmistakably him.

That's it, little dove. Fuck, you're the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. Perfect. I'm going to come if you keep clenching?—

My eyes snapped open. I stared up at him, and his train of thought stopped. His lips parted as the reality of what just happened seeped over him.

We'd mated and marked one another, transforming into one flesh beneath the Moon Goddess. At long, long last, we could speak.

Can you hear me, Aria? He murmured in my head, his perfect voice like honey-dipped velvet. The white of his eye expanded. Truly?

I nodded, a bubble of laughter spilling from my mouth. Following the newfound, invisible cord that bound our souls together, I pushed my own voice through to his mind and responded, never breaking my smile. Yes, I can hear you, Malik. My Malik.

His mouth landed on mine. Hungry. Consuming. Happy.

Then, he began moving. His hips pushed me further into the dirt and grass with experimental, shallow thrusts that somehow seemed to hit new spots deep in my center. My walls fluttered around him, more aftershocks of my climax, and I cried out at the electrifying pulses they elicited.

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He groaned, and this time, I heard the animalistic sound in my head. Careful... I'm barely holding on.

"I don't want you to hold on," I whispered, though my breath caught when he pushed in a little deeper.

I don't—another shallow thrust—want to disappoint you.

His biceps shook from the strain of holding himself above me, and I hooked my ankles around his taut backside. The movement brought him even deeper inside my body. My hand reached up to stroke his cheek, scars and stubble and all. You could never disappoint me. We have the rest of our lives to take our time. Right now, I want you. Allof you, Malik.

He answered with one deep, thorough thrust, pulling out to his tip before re-sheathing himself to the root. The pressure of his hips spread me open. Then, we established a rhythm. Our movements were a bit awkward and unpracticed, but they grew more confident with every second that passed.

Twice, he stopped to collect himself and take the edge off. Each time, he seated himself deep inside of me and pressed dotting kisses to my lips while we took a break from the intense stimulation. Once during a break, I tried squeezing his cock with my inner walls, and he reprimanded me with a gentle nibble to his mark on my neck.

The light from the moon poured over us, allowing me to look up and memorize the sight of him—my beautiful, devotedmate. Our breathing grew choppy, our movements erratic. His cock relentlessly brushed against a part of me that I didn't

know existed, and I came apart a second time.

That boiling heat within me bubbled over, an exquisite crescendo that I was growing increasingly familiar with. My internal muscles tightened, drawing him deeper. Milking him and?—

My release pushed him over the edge.

Malik's thrusts became wild—unhinged—and he roared. His mouth parted, eyes clamping shut as he tilted his head to the moon, and his raspy voice filled my head, the sound of him coming undone for me alone. His pleasure overpowered mine, and I willed every ounce of my focus to stay on this magnificent male as he shattered.

Look at me,he commanded, though I couldn't fathom looking anywhere else. I gave him my eyes, even when they wanted to roll back at the feeling of warmth coating my womb.

A string of unintelligible curses slipped from his mind into mine, and his thrusts slowed as he spilled inside of me. I felt it then. A strange new pressure at my opening, like Malik's already thick cock was swelling all over again. And it didn't stop.

“M-Malik—” I gasped, eyes widening as he tried thrusting inside of me once more, only for the incredible bulge at the base of his cock to obstruct the movement. I tried to wiggle my hips, but we were locked together by the massive swelling. “What's happening?”

Shh,he soothed, kissing his mark on my neck.This is normal... I think. Relax, little dove.My body immediately heeded his quiet direction, my muscles relaxing and becoming pliable for him.Good. That's good, Aria.

His praise washed over me, and my eyes fluttered closed. I love hearing your voice. Will you keep talking?

Another shudder racked through his body, and his shoulder tensed as more of his seed spurted inside of me. My muscles squeezed in response. Goddess, yes. You're extraordinary. I don't know what I did to deserve you. His voice was a rasp in my mind. Look at you, taking my knot so well.

Knot?

Malik nodded, though the movement was strained like the smallest twitch might make him spill inside of me again. A part of me wanted to test the theory, but he reached between our bodies and stroked the spot where he'd swelled and locked inside of me. It's called knotting. It only happens in those with alpha blood who've found their fated mates, according to my research. It increases the chances of...

He trailed off, and I noticed splotches of color on his cheeks. He didn't need to finish. I understood. Knotting created a seal that kept his seed inside of my womb, drastically increasing the chances of conception. Even so, Malik's orgasm must've been substantial, since I was faintly certain I felt hot liquid seeping from where our bodies were joined.

A newfound wave of heat flushed through my body at the prospect of carrying Malik's child, and I experimentally clamped my walls down on him again. A ragged exhale escaped his parted mouth as I squeezed more come from his cock, and his hips tried and failed to dig deeper into my sex.

Keep that up, and we'll be stuck here all night, he warned, though his words weren't the threat he intended.

His tone was playful, and I couldn't help but giggle. You say that like it's a bad thing.

The responding chuckle between my ears made my toes curl, and one corner of his lips curled into a small, hopeful smile. It was... good for you?

“Malik,” I whispered, speaking his name into the world and savoring the taste of it on my tongue. “I’ve never loved anything more than this.”

And, when I reached up to stroke his cheek and connected our lips in a slow, languid kiss, I finished my words through our bond. I’ve never loved anything more than you.

20

MALIK

I lost track of the amount of time we stayed there, a tangle of flesh and sweat and earth, our bodies joined while we familiarized ourselves with one another’s bodies.

The way Aria’s breath hitched when I scraped my teeth over the mark I’d left on her delicate neck. The way her eyes rolled back when I ground my pelvis against her clitoris. How her legs tightened around my waist when my knot began to go down, like she didn’t want to let me go yet.

At last, the swelling diminished enough that I could roll to the side. My shoulders hit the damp earth, and I pulled Aria onto my chest. Dirt and debris fell from her honey locks, and, with a smile on my lips, I plucked a twig from her hairline.

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She giggled. Looks like I need a shower.

I thought I'd never heard anything as beautiful as Aria's voice, but then I heard her in my head, through our bond, and that quickly became my favorite sound in the world. It was almost enough to soothe the primal, ridiculous aversion that rose up inside of me at her mention of a shower. Almost.

A growl rose up my throat, mercifully silent, though I knew she felt my body stiffen beneath her. Every nerve ending inside of me protested the mere thought of her washing my scent from her body. It was insane and animalistic and unreasonable.

Or not...? She ventured, cocking a brow at my reaction. Is everything okay?

Blood began rushing to my cock again, involuntarily, and I tipped my head back, clamping my eyes shut. I'm sorry. I don't feel entirely in control of myself, right now...

That's okay. Aria settled more firmly against my chest, rubbing her hands along the slabs of muscle. She hummed contentedly, even as my hardening shaft brushed against her backside.

I gently hoisted her higher so that her sex rested against my abdomen rather than my hips, intent on at least attempting a conversation with her before plunging inside of her again. The task was made infinitely more difficult when I felt the slick mess leaking from between her legs. I fought the urge to use my fingers to push my seed back into her body.

She smelt like me. Like her scent had been infused with my own, and masculine pride swelled inside of me at the prospect. She wouldn't be able to walk in a room without every male present scenting my spend in her womb, dripping down her thighs, coating her pussy...

A pleasing shiver coursed through me. Marking her, claiming her, finding her, worshipping her... It was my life's purpose now. The greatest thing I could ever or would ever achieve.

I don't think I'll be able to let you out of my sight, I murmured into our bond, coming to the realization myself as I spoke the words. Not for a while, at least. I'm feeling...

Protective? She chuckled, bending down to peck a kiss to my neck. For the first time in my life, my scars didn't prickle at the proximity of another's touch.

That'd be an understatement. I swept my hands up and down her bare spine, memorizing the lean muscles leading to the dimples above her ass. How are you feeling, little dove?

Her head lifted from my neck, and she crossed her hands on the center of my chest, resting her chin on her fingers. She never ceased smiling. "Perfect."

She seemed to mean it. I vaguely remembered hearing her cry out when I first sheathed myself inside of her, but her tight walls adjusted quickly. She took me so well, like she was made for it.

You're not sore? I prompted, brows furrowed in concern.

Aria shook her head. Fit as a fiddle. See?

To demonstrate, she wiggled her hips, slipping down my abdomen until her center

rested above my pelvis once more. Her slick, swollen lips parted to allow my cock to slide between them, nestled perfectly against her seam. All the while, mischief danced in her eyes.

My hips jerked beneath her weight, and I ground my teeth to gain a modicum of control over the pressure already bubbling at the base of my spine again. I could blame it on the full moon or the potency of our mating bond, but milky drops of pre-cum already dripped from my tip.

Before she had the chance to prematurely tease another orgasm out of me, I rolled to the side once more, taking Aria with me.

She gasped before erupting into a fit of giggles as I pinned her to the forest floor. Her blonde waves unfurled around her in a brilliant halo, and I allowed myself a moment to admire the sight before I flipped her onto her stomach.

Her giggling stopped, eyes wide as she glanced over her shoulder. Ass in the air, the position gave me an unobstructed view of the puckered hole at her backside, gleaming with the secretions that dripped from her other entrance.

She was a mess. Beautifully, freshly fucked. Creamy semen and glossy arousal glazed her lips, and I acted on instinct, clamping my hands on her hips and stooping low to taste her. My tongue swept her from front to back, gathering our combined mess into my mouth. She tasted sweet, just like her scent, mixed with a tantalizing dose of natural musk and saltiness.

I could devour her for hours. One day soon, when I possessed more control over the animalistic parts of myself, I would.

But right now, I needed to be inside of her again.

Aria yelped when I nipped at the little bundle of nerves at the apex of her thighs before rising to kneel behind her. Her mouth parted, her breaths heavy as she stared at me over her shoulder, long, slender back on display. I didn't dare pump my fist over my cock, too aware that the smallest bit of friction would send me careening over the edge.

Eyes shuddering closed, I felt the magnetic pull of the moon's beams pour over my naked body. When I opened my eyes again, red lined the edges of my vision. Claws sprung from my fingernails, and my cock swelled impossibly larger.

I teetered on the brink of transformation, somehow maintaining my human form, and gave myself over to the wildness inside. Leaning over Aria's back, I lined up our hips and sheathed myself inside of her in one fell thrust.

A ragged, breathless cry tumbled from her lips as my cock met initial resistance, her walls clamping down to protest the abrupt intrusion. I didn't pull out, remaining seated deep inside of her while I curved my chest over her back.

That's it, little dove, I growled, placing one hand in the dirt beside her trembling one. Her fingers curled into the damp earth, her entire body shuddering beneath me. Take it.

Aria nodded, seemingly unable to form a response beyond a soft moan. I withdrew halfway, only to pump back inside of her with equal fervor. Two thrusts in, and my orgasm already threatened to swell like a hot wave through my body.

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I paused, if only to prolong our second mating a few more seconds, and used my spare hand to sweep a curtain of blonde hair over her shoulder, leaving the back of her neck exposed.

My canines descended at the simple sight of the knob at the top of her vertebra, separating her neck from her spine, and a low groan rumbled into our bond. Aria. I need to mark you again...

She glanced over her shoulder, eyes heavy with lust. Anywhere. Everywhere. Do it. Please.

I didn't waste another second. My teeth closed around the back of Aria's neck, sinking hard and deep into her skin. She moaned, a filthy, sinful sound that I felt in my bones as her blood seeped around my teeth and lips. The heady, un-ignorable pressure between my hips surged, and my nerve endings jolted as I bound my little mate to me a second time.

This time, the mark was reminiscent of our ancient ancestors. The first wolves who mounted their mates from behind, brutal and efficient, teeth clamped on their scruff. When I pulled away, the sight of it decorating the delicate knob at the top of Aria's spine pushed me over the edge.

I began rocking my hips as release barreled through me, a never-ending phenomenon that came in wave after wave. My movements became stunted as the blood swelled at the base of my erection, locking our bodies together once more.

Aria's body gave out beneath me, but I caught her with an arm around her waist. She

trembled, goosebumps peppering her skin as her walls clamped in rhythmic beats around me.

“Goddess,” she sighed, going limp in my arms.

I slowly lowered her to the earth, rolling to my side and pulling her against me. Her back pressed flush against my chest, and my hand cupped her breast, memorizing the fluttering heartbeat beneath it. My other hand rubbed quick circles over the bundle of nerves at her center.

You’re so good. So perfect. The words flooded into our bond before I could stop them, not that I wanted to. I’ll take you home now and clean you up. Then I’ll... Fuck. I gasped, arching my hips in an attempt to push deeper inside of her.

My knot dragged against her tight muscles, and another wave washed over me. Goddess, I was ruined by this female.

Aria groaned, reaching up to stroke my cheek and guide my lips down to hers. We kissed, slow and languid as I spilled more seed inside her womb, satisfying the primitive urge to watch her swell with my pups.

When the latest wave receded, she broke our kiss and grinned against my lips. You’ll take me home, then what?

I chuckled, the sound echoing through our bond, and nuzzled my face, scars and all, into the crook of her neck. I’ll take you home, then we’ll never leave the bedroom again.

True to his word, Malik didn't let me out of his sight. Not in the hours when they returned to the cottage. Nor the days following the full moon.

I didn't mind. In fact, I lavished in the time we spent together.

My life had never felt so full. Nothing had ever felt so complete as when we lounged in bed two days after the night of the full moon, naked and spent and content to live in our own little world. We didn't leave the house those first two days, and no one came to visit. Once, I asked for a cellphone to call my father with, but that summarized the entirety of our communication with the outside world.

When Malik could no longer ignore his duties as general, we begrudgingly popped our blissful bubble and reentered society.

"You know, I think Estelle is short-staffed at the clinic," I mused and flopped onto my stomach on the bed, resting my chin on my crossed arms as I admired Malik's tight, bare backside from across the room.

He glanced up at me before continuing to rummage through his dresser for a pair of boxer briefs, clothing himself for the first time in several days. I smiled and continued. "Maybe while you're at the training grounds today, I could return to work as a nurse?"

Malik stiffened, and his movements became slow as he pulled up his boxers before facing me again. A tortured mixture of trepidation and fervor filled his gaze, like he fought his natural inclination to outright refuse my request.

Of course, you can work in the clinic, he answered, raking a hand through his locks. Tension pulsed off of him in waves. You can always do what you want, Aria.

His words didn't align with his body language. There was more that he was not

telling me. Frowning, I pushed up onto my elbows and prompted him to continue. But...?

Things feel a bit, he paused, rubbing the back of his neck. A loud sigh pushed past his mouth. Intense right now. The thought of letting you out of my sight...

He trailed off, but I understood. The mate bond forced every instinct into overdrive. Malik already possessed heightened protective tendencies, so adding in our fluctuating hormones and the sheer strength of our connection... Well, he hadn't even let me go to the bathroom by myself over the last two days.

I gave him a soft, sympathetic smile. The clinic overlooks the training grounds. You'll always be in my sight.

You don't understand. A soft, pained chuckle filled my head, but he wouldn't look at me. Everything I've ever loved has always been taken from me. By Roman, my father, circumstance...

Pain splintered through my chest. I pushed off of the mattress, clamoring to my feet before closing the space between us and wrapping my arms around his waist.

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You're the first thing that has ever truly been mine, Aria, he whispered into our bond, and my heart ached at the palpable trepidation in his voice. I'm terrified of losing you. I'm terrified that someone—something—will take you from me.

"Oh, Malik," I murmured against his chest, tightening my hold around his toned waistline. My fingers curled into fists, combating an overbearing urge to punish the world and every occupant who ever made my mate feel this way.

His hands stroked up and down my bare back, fingers spread wide as if desperate to touch more of me.

The thought of letting you out of my sight makes me physically sick. Every instinct is screaming at me to keep you here. Right here. His arms tightened around me, stressing the point. The only time I can breathe is when I'm touching you. When I can hear your heart and feel your warmth and smell my come inside of you?—

My thighs clamped together at the reminder.

It will get better, he solemnly vowed. I don't know if it will ever go away, but I'll learn to manage it. Just awhile longer, please stay with me.

I peered up at him, wishing I could somehow mold our bodies into one being, if only to ease the stress and fear churning in his mind. I felt it through our bond, a relentless battle between need and reason. A battle that I didn't want him to have to wage. Not when I wanted to stay by his side as much as he desired me to.

Tipping onto my toes, I brushed a kiss to his collarbone, just beneath the mark I'd left

on his neck. Then I'll stay at the training grounds with you. My teeth nipped the mark, and he shuddered. Maybe I'll ask Estelle for a basket of supplies to treat small injuries on the sidelines.

The tension fell away from his shoulders. Thank you, little dove. This won't be forever. I just need a bit more time to learn to control?—

“You don't need to control anything,” I purred, cupping his cheek and drawing his lips to mine.

He kissed me, slow and practiced, ripping a small moan from my throat when his tongue traced the seam of my lips. I could still taste my own arousal on his lips from our last coupling, musky and earthy and not altogether unpleasant.

Malik had spent countless hours over the last two days worshiping me with his mouth and tongue. It had become a ritual of sorts. He'd bury his face between my thighs, lapping and teasing and consuming me until I shattered and shattered again. Only then would he climb on top of me and seek his own pleasure.

But, in all of our mating, I had yet to do the same for him. And I wanted to. Goddess, I wanted to.

Tearing my lips away from Malik's, a smile pulled on my lips as I slowly slid down his body. My front brushed his abdomen and groin as I dropped to my knees in front of him.

His eye flared wild, even as little lines formed on his brow. Aria?

With a Cheshire grin, I hooked my fingers on the hem of his boxer briefs, but he gripped both of my wrists, stopping me in my tracks. You don't have to?—

I know, but I want to do this,I interrupted.Letme do this. I want the entire pack to know that I took you in my mouth this morning.

The filthy words felt unnatural and clumsy from my mouth. Until two days ago, such a sinful thought had never even crossed my mind. Still, I leaned into the newfound carnal knowledge that Malik and I were exploring together.

Malik's gaze darkened, his grip on my wrists loosening, and the cotton of his boxer briefs stretched as blood pumped to his cock anew. I rode out the swell of confidence and tugged the fabric down his thighs.

His massive length bobbed as the fabric released it, then it settled. A silk-covered rod that nearly reached his navel. It pulsed as he adjusted his stance, thighs rippling with power. It still awed me that something so big could fit so seamlessly inside of my body. That something so hard and unyielding could offer me such pleasure.

My tongue darted out to wet my lips, and I focused all my attention on the job ahead of me. I wanted to do this right. Wanted to give him even a fraction of the ecstasy his mouth gave me.

With confident hands, I grasped him at the root. My thumb and index finger didn't quite touch at this widest point, though my hands were admittedly small. I slid the unfinished circle higher on his shaft, then dragged it back down again, noting the way his breathing quickened above me.

Continuing like that with one hand, I allowed my other to investigate the heavy sack hanging below his cock. The twin orbs were hard and tight in my palm, covered by silky skin. I cupped them, then allowed their weight to drop down again, jerking on the flesh.

Malik's cock pulsed, and I giggled. Emboldened, I sat up on my knees and leaned

forward, pressing a featherlight kiss to one ball, then the other.

A ragged sigh ripped from his chest, and a sudden eagerness to wrap my mouth around the bulbous head at his tip gripped me. Unfortunately, now that I sat on my knees, I realized that his height would make it difficult. The top of my head barely reached the base of his manhood.

“Bed,” I directed, nudging him toward the furniture.

He obliged without objection, boxers still clinging to his thighs. The mattress sank beneath his weight as he perched on the edge.

I crawled after him, widening his legs so the long, powerful limbs stretched on either side of me. I took up position between his thighs, my hands rubbing the slabs of muscle lining the hairy inner parts of his legs.

You’re beautiful, I told him, the honest words slipping into our bond before I could stop them. My eyes trailed up the length of his body. His heaving chest. Broad shoulders. Arms that held him in a sitting position, slightly leaned back so he had a better view of me on the floor.

I didn’t give him the chance to respond.

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I leaned over him, running my tongue up every inch of his erection. When I reached the tip, I swept over the little seam, gathering the glaze of pre-cum onto the tip of my tongue. Salty.

Then, allowing instinct to guide me, I wrapped my mouth around the swollen bulb. It was thick and imposing in my mouth, but I took care to avoid grazing the sensitive ridges with my teeth.

A string of curses filled our bond, and I sucked, bobbing my head up and down. Each time, I tried to draw him deeper into my mouth, but by the time he reached the back of my throat, I'd still only taken half of him.

Saliva dripped from the corners of my mouth, and my throat began to strain, but I continued, urged on by the ragged breaths tearing from my mate. A quick peek up at him revealed a mask of ecstasy covering his features, eyes half-lidded and mouth parted as he watched me. His hands gripped the quilt, claws ripping through the fabric.

When I needed a break, I withdrew his cock from my mouth and focused on the tip. On the spot where the bulb came together into a tight ridge on the bottom. When I sucked here, salty whiteness leaked from his seam, coating my tongue. Then, when I felt he was close, I started moving up and down his length again.

As I drew him into my mouth, Malik's hips jerked, jamming further down my throat than ever before. I gagged.

Fuck! He gasped, eyes clamping shut, even as he attempted to withdraw and

apologize.I'm sorry?—

I shook my head, placing both hands on his thighs to stop him from receding.Fuck me... Please.

Hesitation crossed his eyes, and I thought he might refuse. Instead, after several long moments, his jaw clamped tight and he began to thrust into my mouth. Each time, his cock slid further back, hitting the back of my throat. Saliva ran from my mouth, tears dripping from my cheeks. My jaw ached.

I was a mess, and yet, I didn't think I'd ever been so aroused as Malik chased his orgasm, pounding into me with fervor. Soft grunts filled my head, his or mine I didn't know. Blood rushed to my clitoris, and I wished I had something—anything—between my legs to rub against. Instead, I rocked against nothing.

Malik's entire body went still. His teeth clamped on his bottom lip before they peeled open, releasing a silent cry.

Spurts of liquid shot from his tip, salty and musky, coating the back of my throat. I gagged at the sheer volume of his spend, unable to swallow it all down, but unable to spit it out either because he plugged my mouth.

I could scarcely breathe by the time Malik withdrew. I gasped, white seed and mucus dripping down my chin. Before I knew it, Malik pulled me onto his lap.

He spread my thighs around his hips, and hiss of air flew from my lips as he forced me down on his still-spurting erection.Malik!

Warmth filled my womb as I clamped down on his swelling knot, just in time for our bodies to lock. I giggled at his unwillingness to waste even an ounce of his seed

outside of my body.

Malik cradled me against his chest and whispered sweet nothings in our bond. You're incredible. Did I hurt you? Goddess— I've never... I didn't think it would— Aria? Little dove?

I giggled again at his worry. Of course you didn't hurt me. That was...

Disgusting? He cringed, fear tainting the word.

Sexy, I finished, wiping at the corner of my mouth. Let's do that again.

Not so fast, little dove. He chuckled, and the sound was filled with palpable relief. His hand slipped between our bodies, deft fingers seeking out my clit and pinching the engorged nub once. It's your turn now.

22

MALIK

"The kid is out of his depth, General. We'd be smart to cut him loose and not waste any more resources on him. He'll just keep getting hurt." Ethan, one of my commanding officers, sidled up to stand beside me.

We watched the soldier in question, a young male who'd finished school over a year ago. He sat on the makeshift medical table while Aria bound his arm close to his body, wincing every time his dislocated shoulder shifted.

Aria's fingers worked meticulously, strapping gauze across his slight frame to keep his arm and shoulder from moving. Blonde waves fell across her brow, and her tongue peeked from between her lips as she concentrated on the task in front of her, a

dedicated healer.

As soon as we'd arrived at the training grounds, she set about gathering supplies from Estelle to create an on-site clinic where she could treat any minor injuries. She wore a smile as she worked, glowing despite the wary, uncertain glances she received from our pack mates. She never batted an eye at my ridiculous need to keep her by my side. For that, I was eternally grateful.

What does he want to do? I questioned, forcing my attention away from my mate and back to Ethan.

He sighed. "He doesn't want to give up. He's relentlessly stubborn, and it'll get him killed."

My lips pulled into a hard line.

The soldier, Gio, hadn't adjusted to life as an Intonat Noctes soldier. Not like the other recruits that joined last year, at least. In both his wolf and human forms, he was smaller than most other males in our legions, and he lacked the speed and agility that made our female warriors so dangerous.

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Still, he never ceased to work harder than every other soldier in my army. Indeed, he possessed a warrior's heart, even though his body couldn't keep up. He'd badly broken his leg just over a week ago and returned to training as soon as his accelerated healing completed. My chest ached for the boy.

Let me speak to him, I decided.

Ethan dipped his head, shoulders sagging in relief. I knew Ethan well. He was a good male, and an even better commanding officer. He wanted every member of his platoon to succeed, so it pained him to know that Gio had fallen so far behind.

"Thank you, Malik," he said, clapping me once on the shoulder before returning to his warriors to oversee their work.

Releasing a deep breath, I turned to deliver the bad news to Gio. At least it gave me an excuse to visit Aria in the midst of the training session.

She pressed an icepack to Gio's injured shoulder, a small smile gracing her lips as she offered him words of encouragement. Rabid, ridiculous jealousy flared inside of me, fueling my urge to dislocate the kid's other shoulder. A scowl crossed my features as I hastened my approach.

Aria looked up, her eyes lightening upon noticing me. "Malik!"

The tightness in my chest lessened upon hearing the joy in her voice, and I lifted an arm to create space for Aria, who fluttered to my side in an instant. I pressed a kiss to the top of her head. Hello, little dove.

Is everything okay? A little line formed between her brow.

I took a deep breath, reveling in our mingled scents on her body. I allowed it to calm me, sucking her into my lungs like an addict guzzling down his drug of choice. I need to speak to your patient.

She pulled back and blinked. "Gio?"

Goddess, even the sound of his name on her lips stoked the burning flames in my chest. She'd turned me into a besotted fool. Pushing my aversion aside, I dipped my chin and looked to where the young man sat on the exam table.

He'd clearly heard his name. Despite his injury, he cast the icepack aside and scrambled off of the table, straightening his spine and tilting his chin back to stand at attention in front of me. Even so, his skin was pale and his eyes glazed with a layer of worry.

"What can I do for you, General Malik?" His voice took on a deeper octave than usual.

Keeping Aria tucked against my side, I opened my mind-link with Gio so that Aria could hear the conversation as well. We need to discuss your future here, soldier.

The whites of his eyes expanded. My future...?

I nodded, lips pressing into a grim line. Have you ever considered taking up a different role in the pack? Healer? Messenger? Caregiver?

There were plenty of positions within the pack for individuals of varying strengths, and each one played an integral role in maintaining the pack's daily function. Healers treated the sick and injured. Messengers spread important intel across far stretches of

territory, connecting the pack when mind-link became hazy over long distances. Caregivers protected the old and young, tending to the beginnings and endings of life.

Unfortunately, in the decade since my father's death, the culture of the pack shifted, placing far more value on the life and duties of a warrior than any other position. As such, almost every young pack member sought to join the Intonat Noctearmy, even when their strengths resided elsewhere.

Gio blanched. No, I- I've only ever wanted to be a soldier.

Right, I murmured, steeling myself to crush the young male's hopes. Gio, it's my duty to protect my warriors. I can't in good conscience send you to the front line when you can't make it through a training session unscathed.

General Malik, he implored, panic rising through our mind link. I'm getting better every day. I-I'm learning. Please, don't send me away.

A wave of pity that didn't belong to me swelled in my chest, and I knew I felt Aria's emotions through our bond. Her fingers curled tight into the cotton of my t-shirt, and I sensed that she was biting her tongue against jumping to Gio's defense.

You've become a liability to your unit. Ethan can't risk the lives of every other soldier in his control to accommodate your desire to fight. Goddess, a bitter taste salivated in my mouth. I hated this.

Gio shook his head. Please. My father... I need to be a warrior. It's all he's ever wanted for me. I can't go home if I'm not a soldier anymore.

Fuck.

I understood, far better than most, the need to rise to a father's expectations. There

was a time, long, long ago, when I could do no wrong in my father's eyes. Then, the attack happened, and, suddenly, I was an abomination. A blight on his legacy. It didn't matter how hard I worked or how obedient I was.

I sighed, sensing Aria's eyes peering up at me, and broke. Perhaps we can work something out...

Anything, Gio answered. I'll do anything, so long as I remain a soldier.

He meant it, too. He'd rather die a soldier's death than consider living as a disappointment to the most important figure in his life—his father. For that reason, I nodded slowly.

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You won't be a member of a unit anymore, and you won't see battle at the front lines, I warned before making my offer. I'll take you on as my adjutant—my assistant. You'll stay by my side and perform administrative tasks, but in our spare time, I'll train you. How does that sound?

His eyes lit up. Your adjutant? You mean it?

I dipped my chin once, and the smile on Gio's face could've melted a glacier. Goddess, I hoped I wouldn't come to regret my decision.

I didn't need an assistant. I'd performed my tasks as General for countless years without one, but I didn't have a mate all those years. Now, having someone to perform my administrative tasks would certainly free up time to spend with Aria...

You'll begin tomorrow, I decided and turned away, eager to get away from the young male before he acted on the gratitude that pooled in his gaze and tried to hug me or fall to his knees. Listen to my mate so your shoulder heals properly.

"Yes, sir! I will, sir!" Gio called after me, but I'd already pressed a quick, chaste kiss to the top of Aria's head and began walking away.

Malik, wait! Aria called, and I slowed my steps to allow her to catch up to me. A bright smile greeted me when she arrived, and she twined her fingers with mine. That was incredibly kind of you.

I shrugged, though warmth crept up my cheeks at her praise. I know what it's like to want to impress your father, I muttered by way of explanation.

She sucked her bottom lip between her teeth, and I knew she wanted to know more. I saw the question dancing behind her sky-blue eyes.

Before she could ask it, I shook my head. Not here, little dove.

Because any conversation pertaining to my father would not be a pleasant one. Nor a short one.

Of course. Not until you're ready, she answered, shifting until we stood face-to-face. With the utmost gentleness, she dropped my hand in favor of reaching up to stroke my cheeks. Goddess, she was too good for me.

Bending low, I captured her mouth in a quick, hard kiss, willing every ounce of devotion that filled my body into the touch of our lips. My hands tangled in her hair, teeth nipping at her fleshy lower lip once before pulling away. Soon. I'll tell you everything soon.

Aria nodded, hands sliding up and down my chest. You have a good heart, Malik, she whispered in our bond, and I felt the words like a caress down my spine. I'm so lucky you're mine. This pack is lucky, too.

That night, Aria laid on top of me in bed. Our bodies connected at the hips, locked together until my biological response to our coupling subsided. The duration of the knot had decreased with every climax that rocked through my body, but we still had at least fifteen minutes before we'd be able to separate. Neither of us cared.

I stroked her back, memorizing the landscape of the muscles that lined her spine. Sweat dampened her skin, and a small groan escaped her lips when I massaged the globes of her backside.

"That feels good," she hummed in contentment, still regaining her breath.

She'd done a majority of the work in that round, and, when I closed my eyes, images of her breasts bouncing as she rode me with abandon filled my mind.

She'd braced her hands on my bent knees for support, leaning back to offer me an unrestricted view as she impaled herself on my cock time and time again. Her slick arousal lubricated every movement, coating my groin and dampening the natural curls around her sex.

I clamped my eyes shut as the memory caused another spurt of seed to shoot from my tip, and I jerked beneath her.

Aria felt it, another laugh bubbling from her throat. "What made that happen?"

Rather than explain, I sent the mental image through our bond. She gasped and pushed onto her elbows to look me in the eye, her cheeks coloring. "Oh."

It was my turn to chuckle. Exactly.

She settled deeper onto my cock in response, getting comfortable again. At this rate, it'll be a wonder if I'm not pregnant by the next full moon.

I stilled beneath her. Pregnant. Pups.

It was something I never knew I wanted until I found Aria. Before she walked into my life, I'd long since given up hope of ever finding someone to mate with. As a result, I never even contemplated the possibility of children—pups, as they were known to shifters.

Apprehension edged into my excitement. Every cell in my body rejoiced at the prospect of Aria carrying my heirs—as many as the Moon Goddess was willing to give us. In the same breath, I didn't know the first thing about being a good father. I'd

never had an example. My own father...

Nausea roiled up my throat at the memories that threatened to resurface, but I tampered them down.

Malik? Aria's soft voice was a balm in my mind. She lifted her head, peeking at me with concern etched across her round features.

I stroked a lock of blonde away from her bare shoulder and sighed. I promised her the truth. It was time she learned it. My father wanted to kill me.

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She blinked, confusion and horror crossing her features. What?

After it became clear that I wouldn't die from my injuries, my father wanted me dead anyway. My chest felt tight. The scar on my neck burned and itched. He thought an alpha needed a working voice.

Aria's eyes pooled with palpable pain and disbelief. How old were you?

She deserved the whole truth. She deserved to know the whole, morbid story. Taking a deep breath and mustering every last ounce of courage, I forced myself to relive the worst day of my life.

23

ARIA

My heart ceased beating as I waited for Malik to answer me.

He took one long, shaking breath, as if steeling himself against whatever horrors still haunted him from the past. I felt his pain and fear through our bond, as potent as thought it was my own. I'd give anything to take it away.

I was six when I lost my voice, he answered at last.

The breath caught in my throat. Six. He was six years old when he received the heinous injury that tore through his throat and cost him his voice.

My mother and I were outside. I was playing in the stream. She'd left Roman in the nursery to nap, otherwise he would've been there, too. He spoke slowly, every word burdened by the truth. I could scarcely breathe. My uncle—my father's brother—had always wanted to be alpha. To do that, he had to kill not only my father, but my father's heirs as well.

Dread curdled low in my belly as the reality of Malik's words seeped over me. His uncle. His own flesh and blood did this to him?

The ruined skin at his throat shifted as his throat bobbed, and his gaze searched the ceiling above, refusing to meet mine. He decided to start with me and Roman. I guess he thought our deaths would weaken my father enough to make it easy to finish the job. He didn't expect my mother to fight back so hard.

She saved my life, he continued, rasping the truth into our bond. The surface of his eye gleamed, and I rubbed the expanse of his bare chest in a pitiful attempt at comforting him. I tried to save her, too, but I was still too young to shift at will. That's when my uncle got his claws into me.

I looked up at him, studying the scars like it was the first time I was truly seeing them. Malik received them from a pack member—a family member—who thought he had to kill a six year old child in order to rise through the ranks.

My stomach churned with sickness.

Now that I knew the truth, I saw the distinct ridges of claws marring the old wounds on his face. I saw where the flesh had been reattached and where it had been forced to regrow over time. Where two claws caught purchase on his throat and tore through the critical voice box.

"Your mother?" I whispered, my voice a hoarse husk of itself. I already knew the

answer.

He shook his head. She was gone before help arrived, but she took my uncle with her.

I swallowed the lump in my throat. I'm so sorry.

Malik blinked, as if scattering the dark memories. When his eyes met mine again, they held a strange combination of grief and peace. I wondered how many times he'd shared this story with another person.

Throughout the conversation, the swelling at the base of his manhood diminished enough for me to slide off of him. I shifted to the side, draping one leg over his hips while resting my ear on his chest, just above his heart.

What about your father?

He gave a deep sigh. He grieved my mother for several years. And when it became clear I wouldn't heal, he renamed Roman as heir. It was for the good of the pack.

I physically recoiled at the insinuation. As if Malik's lack of a voice somehow made him not good for pack, when time and time again he'd proven himself a far more worthy leader than his younger brother. I opened my mouth to tell him this when he continued.

He told Roman to kill me. Said I'd always be a threat to his rule.

My heart clenched. And yet, Malik was still here, which meant...

"Roman refused?"

Malik dipped his chin in confirmation. I owe Roman my life. More than once, he

stepped in and convinced our father of my worth before he could kill me himself.

A war of conflicting emotions churned in my chest. I couldn't wrap my head around this so-called version of Roman. The version that protected my mate rather than humiliating and degrading him.

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I swore my loyalty to him and...Malik paused, and I peered up to find him already watching me, uncertainty in his gaze.

“And?” I prompted, smoothing a piece of hair away from his brow.

With a deep breath, he continued. When the time came, I killed our father in Roman’s name.

My eyes widened, betraying my shock. He plotted with Roman to kill their own father? Their alpha? Was it premeditated? A duel? A massacre?

How it happened didn’t matter. Malik killed his father...

Malik winced, ripping his gaze away from mine. I shouldn’t have told you that. You must think I’m a monster. I’m sorry?—

“I could never think you’re a monster,” I interrupted him, catching his cheek in my palm and turning his face back toward mine. “Never, Malik.”

His throat bobbed again, but he said nothing.

“From what you’ve said, your father was the monster. He deserved whatever you did to him.” Ferocity laced every word, and I realized with startling clarity that I meant it. I hoped the male suffered in his last moments. I hoped Malik’s father died a coward’s death.

You looked... unsettled, he murmured, uncertainty still shifting on his features.

I shook my head. "I'm sorry. I was surprised, that's all." Some of the tension lining his shoulders slackened, and I felt his ribs expand and contract with a deep sigh. I didn't share in his relief though. My mind reeled at this new information.

"Malik..." I paused, chewing on my bottom lip. "Did you inflict the killing blow?"

His brow furrowed, but he nodded once. Yes.

My heartbeat quickened, and I immediately scrambled to a sitting position, tugging the bedsheets up to my hips.

You know what this means, don't you? I questioned, holding his gaze with some strange mixture of excitement and trepidation fluttering in my belly. Laws of succession state that, in the event of a coup, the one who inflicts the killing blow becomes the alpha. It is your right?—

Malik's features hardened and he silenced me with two cold words. No, Aria.

I flinched. He'd never spoken to me so roughly. Clipped and final. Leaving no room for debate.

Still, I tried again. But?—

No, he repeated, and a muscle in his jaw twitched. I fought my father in Roman's name. I swore my loyalty to him.

"He doesn't deserve your loyalty!" I argued, the words bubbling from my mouth before I could stop them.

He saved my life, Malik reasoned, remaining significantly more calm than me.

Heat flamed up my neck, anger consuming me. Malik knew, better than anyone else, the darkness in Roman's heart. Roman was a disease that would fester and rot the entirety of the In-tonat Nocte Pack if his power remained unchecked. According to the ancient laws of succession that governed werewolf packs for centuries, the In-tonat Nocte Pack rightfully belonged to Malik.

He had the chance to take his place as alpha—to end Roman's reign of cruelty—yet he seemed determined to never claim his birthright. And all because he believed he owed Roman his life?

My teeth clenched, but I wouldn't back down. Not yet. "He only saved you because he wanted to turn you into a weapon. He has said so several times since I've arrived. He's selfish, Malik. He wanted to turn you against your father for his own benefit."

Malik didn't say anything, content to let me stew and rage while he remained a passive audience.

"He's cruel. To you. To me. To everyone." My voice became a whisper, the fight fading away as quickly as it came, replaced by quiet desperation. A plea. "You're the rightful alpha. It's your birthright, and the right you won when you defeated your father."

For the first time since this conversation started, a crack seemed to form in his resolve. It happened the moment I whispered the truth of Roman's cruelty toward me, as if he only cared about protecting me. Conflict raged behind his gaze, and I physically felt his turmoil through our bond. My chest hurt at the intensity of it, extending for several long seconds.

At last, his voice filled my head. I am no alpha, little dove. Immeasurable sadness seeped in every word, and I saw guilt pool in his eyes. Too much has happened. I've been broken too many times.

Emotion clogged my throat, and my bottom lip threatened to tremble as I crawled into his lap again.

He believed that. He believed he'd been broken beyond repair.

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But I knew the truth. Every trial he'd ever faced, however cruel and unfair, had honed him into the male I loved. A male worthy of the title of alpha. Pressing my cheek to his chest, I clamped my eyes shut and focused on the steady beat of his heart. His good, fair heart.

"Maybe that's exactly why it should be you," I whispered, kissing the spot above his heart.

24

ARIA

Over the next few weeks, we entered a blissful period of peace. Every night, I fell asleep entangled with my mate. Every morning, we woke side by side.

Although Roman kept Malik occupied with his various duties as a general, overseeing training or making preparations for the quarterly patrol of the entire In-tonat Nocteterritory, he did not dare to interfere with us. Since we cemented our mate bond, Roman smartly kept his distance, no doubt recognizing that Malik's control hung on a very thin, very precarious thread.

Most days, I remained by Malik's side on the training field. Sometimes, he accompanied me to the clinic, hulking by the wall while I worked and glaring daggers at any patient that dared to linger too long after treatment. If he couldn't be with me, Emerson took his place, and we spent enough time together that I considered her a friend.

Several times a week, Malik and I would shift into our wolf forms and enjoy long runs through the surrounding woodland. More often than not, we'd find a pond or a meadow and spend hours alone amongst the wilderness, making love and talking and playing and learning every little detail about our soul's other half.

And, through it all, my belief in Malik's ability to lead the Intonat Nocte continued to grow.

He spoke to every pack member, old and young, strong and weak, with fairness. He governed the warriors with an iron fist, yet treated every individual with kindness when they earned it. From my view, the pack revered him as a leader. Only a select few, who I'd come to recognize as Roman's inner cadre, showed disdain for Malik.

I knew, in my heart, that the Intonat Nocte Pack would respect and celebrate his ascension as alpha. Only Malik stood in the way of his own success.

Still, I didn't make the mistake of bringing it up to him again.

"General!" Gio called, jogging to catch up to where Malik and I trekked, hand-in-hand, from the training yard to our cottage. "I've just received word from Roman that he'd like us to leave for the patrol of the outlying territories tonight."

Malik and I stiffened, my heart thundering to a halt. We turned to face Gio, who'd gone above and beyond in his new role as Malik's assistant.

Tonight? I questioned for Malik alone, my grip on his hand tightening. I thought we were leaving next week? I promised Estelle I'd be here for the pack's War Trial this weekend.

The War Trial was a bi-annual event held to allow warriors and their leadership the chance to demonstrate their fighting abilities. Each squad split into separate teams

and fought in a simulated battle until only one team emerged victorious. My home pack never partook in anything so needlessly violent, but it was a pivotal part of Intonat Nocteculture.

According to Estelle, each War Trial saw multiple casualties and countless injuries, and healers were in extremely high demand.

We are, Malik promised me, placing his hand on the small of my back. He addressed Gio next, opening up his mental pathways to allow me to listen to their conversation. We're leaving after the War Trial. What reason does Roman have to move up our departure?

Gio skidded to a stop, his chest heaving as if he sprinted all the way from the pack house. "He has reason to believe one of the newly acquired territories is plotting to withdraw from Intonat Noctecontrol."

Malik's brow furrowed, a frown crossing his features. I've heard nothing of the sort.

"It's new information." Gio struggled to catch his breath and shrugged a shoulder. "That's all I know. He said to prepare to depart immediately. He'll be joining us on the journey, just in case the reports hold any truth."

I blinked. Roman will be joining us?

Malik said that Roman has never left the center of Intonat Nocte territory for something as trivial as the quarterly patrol before. Hells, he didn't even leave for an actual war! He was choosing now to become an involved alpha?

One look at Malik told me that he thought the same thing. My mate's nostrils flared, clear discontent etched in his frown. He nodded once at Gio. Fine. We'll prepare to leave tonight. Will you tell Roman?

Gio hurried away, leaving Malik and I alone once more.

Trouble squeezed at my gut, and I chewed on my bottom lip. Goddess, this change of events wasn't ideal, but it couldn't be helped. "I'll need to go tell Estelle that we're leaving tonight. She'll have to find someone to take my shifts for the War Trials?—"

You're not coming with us, little dove, Malik interrupted me, stepping in front of me until he eclipsed the world behind him.

My mouth fell open. "What? Why?"

Roman's coming with us for a reason. My guess is that reason has to do with you, Aria. I felt his anger simmering through our bond, the intensity of it scalding. The further away you are from him, the better.

"But I'll be with you," I protested, crossing my arms against my chest. "There's no safer place for me than by your side."

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He sighed. Usually I'd agree. But I'd rather spend a few days apart than make you endure the entire trip in close proximity to him. You'll be safer and happier here.

I frowned, shifting away from him when he reached out to cradle my cheek with his palm. "I highly doubt that."

Two lines formed between Malik's brow at my refusal, frustration and guilt clouding his good eye. I'll have Gio stay behind. He won't leave your side from morning to night. He's not much of a fighter, but I trust him. Emerson, too. And you'll be with Estelle all weekend.

I hated this. I hated that Malik made this decision without consulting me. Even the idea of spending ten minutes apart made my heart ache, especially after weeks of bliss by his side. I felt more connected than ever. Like he'd become a part of my body, and separation would be akin to death.

I think this is a mistake, I whispered into our bond, shaking my head and avoiding his gaze. My throat felt too tight to speak out loud.

He captured my chin between his thumb and forefinger, the space between our bodies disappearing as he forced me to look up at him. I'll be back before you know it. Please... Do this for me.

I swallowed, unable to look away from him no matter how much I tried. If you're right and Roman wanted to join the trip to get close to me, he'll be furious when he finds out I'm not going.

We're not going to tell him. Not until the last possible moment. His thumb trailed up to trace the corner of my lips, a tender, devoted touch that slowly melted away my anger. If he changes his mind about joining the patrol when he discovers it, we'll know he was up to something.

"Then I'll be able to go with you?" I prompted, sliding my hands up the ridges of his abdomen.

Yes, he chuckled, and the delicious sound filled my head and sent shivers down my spine. Then you'll come with me, little dove.

I dared a smile. "How long do you think we have before you leave?"

He shrugged a massive shoulder. A few hours, at least.

Good, I hummed, standing on my tiptoes to kiss him. His lips parted, accepting. We'll need every single one of them if we're about to spend a week apart.

25

MALIK

To my surprise, Roman didn't bat an eye when it became clear that Aria wouldn't be joining us on the quarterly patrol. I'd been so certain that he only wanted to come to get close to her, yet he hardly spared her a second glance as we readied for departure.

It should've been a blessing. I should've felt pleased that Roman was respecting my mate.

And yet, hours after we left the pack house, unease curdled in my stomach. The fur on the back of my wolf's neck prickled, refusing to lay flat. I considered it my body's

natural reaction to leaving Aria after spending every waking and sleeping moment by her side for the last few weeks.

We'd traveled far enough away that I could no longer speak to her through our bond, and the quiet unnerved me. Still, her emotions pulsed through our connection, allowing me to feel her sadness at my departure. My little dove's longing matched my own.

It had taken every ounce of strength to peel my body from hers when the time came to leave. She'd become my home, nestled between her legs, our hips connected and mouths slowly consuming one another's. I'd ensured every inch of her body carried my scent before I left.

We should stop at the Anamis territory for the night, Anders suggested from where his tawny wolf trailed behind me and Roman.

Unsurprisingly, most of the wolves I'd selected for the journey had been replaced by Roman's inner circle. He didn't go anywhere without his herd of beta males. Even so, I knew the territory best, so Roman begrudgingly let me take the lead.

A puff of steam escaped my snout. We'll push ahead to Lescience. It's only another hour.

I was determined to return to Aria as quickly as possible, and that meant pushing ahead, even when our bodies fatigued.

Anders growled, but none of the other wolves protested. Even Roman remained quiet and compliant.

The faster we reach the Mendosia territory, the better, he huffed, his flanks heaving with deep breaths. He wasn't accustomed to long journeys, and it showed. I'm itching

to kill something.

I fought the urge to roll my eyes. The Mendosia territory rested at the farthest reach of Intonat Noctet territory, and Roman's reports claimed that the recently acquired pack had staged a rebellion of sorts. He wanted to end the discontent before it spread to any other surrounding territories. Of course, in Roman's mind, that meant bloodshed.

We'll reach Mendosia by tomorrow evening, I answered, dipping beneath a particularly low branch. A few thistles snagged in my fur and prodded at my legs.

Roman increased his pace to jog next to me. Have you lost the ability to speak to Aria, yet?

I narrowed my eyes, suspicion creeping into my mind. Why?

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On instinct, I sent tendrils of awareness through our bond. Though countless miles separated us, I could sense she was safe. Her side of the bond felt rather peaceful, no doubt because she was currently sleeping, but I willed a wave of warmth to sweep over her through the bridge connecting our minds, like a physical caress.

Roman ducked to avoid a low-hanging vine. You possess knowledge of the most sacred bond possible between two shifters. I'm just curious about how it works.

My jaw tightened, but I sensed no deceit in his explanation. With another huff, I offered an answer. It's beginning to grow dimmer, though it lasted far longer than any pack bond. By the time we reach Mendosia, I'd guess we'll barely be able to feel one another.

I'm sorry, brother, Roman murmured. I know how devoted you are to her. Rest assured, she'll be well taken care of in your absence.

Kindness veiled his ominous words.

26

ARIA

It had been sixty hours since Malik left, and I stopped being able to sense him through our bond an entire day ago.

The bond still existed, but only an empty void waited on the other side. I'd felt it dimming as the miles between us increased, but I never expected it to go completely

silent. It was the worst feeling in the world.

Nausea lingered at the base of my throat, though I hadn't eaten enough breakfast this morning to actually lose my stomach. In fact, I hadn't eaten much at all since Malik departed for the quarterly patrol three days prior. While the rest of the pack focused on the War Trials, every fiber in my being screamed to be reunited with its mate.

"Aria, love," Estelle cooed from the other side of the clinic where she was patching up a female warrior with a nasty cut on her arm. "Maybe you should go home and rest. I can handle the clinic for the rest of the evening."

I blinked, willing my hazy vision to focus on the senior healer. "I'm alright." The words came out in an unconvincing husk. "There's only a few more hours until the final match ends, right?"

"That's right," she confirmed, though worry still plagued her features. "It's natural to feel withdrawn with your fated mate so far away, but you look unwell. Are you certain you're not sick?"

Honestly, I'd felt downright ill for the past two days, but I figured it was due to Malik's absence. I lifted a single shoulder in a shrug. "Just not eating very well. Or sleeping very well."

Estelle's brows knit together, and she narrowed her eyes at me while she wrapped the warrior's arm. "Nausea?"

I dipped my chin. "A little." A lot.

"What about your breasts? Are they sore?"

Heat flushed to my cheeks at the personal question, and my eyes darted to the other

patients and nurses filling the clinic. If any of them were listening to our conversation, they didn't show it.

I cleared my throat, wrapping my arms around my chest and taking note of the dull ache in my breast tissue. Goddess, I hadn't even noticed. "Yes."

The analyzing gleam in Estelle's eyes softened, and she finished wrapping the patient's arm before rounding the examination table. She crossed the room to rummage through a cabinet, then pulled out a single blue box. When she approached, my eyes widened at the label adorning the cardboard in her hand. Pregnancy test.

"Go to the bathroom," Estelle instructed, a small smile gracing her lips. "Take all the time you need."

"I- I don't think I could already be..." I faltered, mouth opening and closing as I searched for an explanation. All the while, something like hope flickered in my chest for the first time in days. "It's only been a few weeks. Would it even show up so early?"

"The gestational age for shifters is only seven months." Estelle's eyes flickered to my stomach. "You'd be surprised how quickly a pup takes root."

The whites of my eyes flared, and I took the pregnancy test from her hand. Anticipation and nerves heightened my heart rate as I sought refuge in the restroom, locking the door behind me. I read and re-read the instruction pamphlet inside the box, then tore through the foil protecting the test stick.

When I'd finished, I set the test face-down on a tissue, unable to bear the thought of watching it for the three-minute processing window. I counted to sixty in my head, then again and again, pacing back and forth on the tile floor.

I could feel my heartbeat in my fingertips as I finished the final countdown and approached the pregnancy test stick. Taking a deep breath, I reached for the plastic and turned it over. Two windows displayed little red lines. The first window—the test window—held only a single line, but the second window...

Two lines. Positive.

One hand flew over my mouth as I stared at the test, tears prickling my eyes. I was pregnant. “Thank you, Moon Goddess,” I whispered, eyes rising to the ceiling as if I could see through it to the sky.

The pregnancy test wavered in my fingers, a result of my trembling hands, and I clamped my eyes shut to focus on the bond connecting my soul to Malik’s. I wanted to speak to him—to feel him. To allow him to feel my sheer joy at the news. I wanted to share the moment with him.

And yet, on the other side of the bond, nothingness gaped back at me.

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Soon, I promised myself. You'll get to tell him soon.

Despite my longing for Malik, a small giggle escaped my lips as I placed a hand on my flat belly. Soon, it would be swollen with life.

I was staring at my reflection in the mirror, hand cradling my stomach and the womb within, when I heard it. Shouting far beyond the clinic's walls. At first, I believed it was part of the final battle of the War Trials, until...

Someone pounded relentlessly on the bathroom doors. The force of their fist shook the walls. "Aria!"

I threw open the bathroom door, still clutching the pregnancy test in one hand. Estelle stood on the other side of the threshold, her eyes wide and filled with despair. She braced her arms on either side of the door frame, chest rising and falling in labored breaths.

"What is it?" I questioned, horror settling low in my stomach. "Estelle, what's wrong?"

"Alpha Roman just returned," she whispered, her bottom lip trembling. "There was an attack."

Alpha Roman just returned. There was an attack. Alpha Roman returned. Attack.

The words played over and over again in my mind as I pushed past Estelle, something akin to blind panic coursing through my veins. My heart pounded like a war-drum, beating desperately against my ribcage to keep my body moving despite the cement-like weight that settled over my chest and made it impossible to breathe.

Estelle called after me, but I didn't hear her words. If Roman had returned, then surely Malik was back, too. There was a perfectly reasonable explanation why I still couldn't sense him through our bond...Wasn't there?

When I broke through the door into the clinic's main treatment room, chaos surrounded me. Half a dozen healers stood around a single bed, where a familiar male bled over the white sheets.

Roman.

Gruesome injuries plagued his naked body. Someone had raked their claws over his chest, reducing the skin and muscle to barely-attached ribbons. Blood caked the alpha's hairline, and vicious holes peppered his body where canine teeth sunk into flesh and tried to rip him apart.

My eyes widened at the sheer gruesomeness of his injuries before flashing to every other bed in the clinic. Malik was nowhere to be seen.

In fact, none of the other warriors who went on the days-long patrol had returned, either. Only Roman.

I struggled to pull air into my lungs, slowly turning back to the hospital bed where Roman writhed in pain. Absently, I shot an arrow of awareness down the sacred bond connecting my soul to Malik's and...Nothing.

It still existed, but only darkness waited on the other side. No trace of the male I loved. The sire of the child in my womb. Mymate.

My control slipped, and I stormed across the clinic floor, spearing directly for Roman. A loud shout ripped from his throat as one of the physicians poured a disinfecting elixir over his tattered chest.

He never saw me coming.

“Aria!” Estelle protested, but I ignored her and shoved through the circle of medical staff.

“Where is he?” I seethed, teeth clamped to the point of pain.

“A-Aria...” Roman’s eyes cracked open, his lips still twisted in agony. He gasped, struggling to catch his breath.

I had half a mind to push my index finger into the nearest gouge-mark on his shoulder, if only to make him hurry up and answer the question. “Where. Is. He?”

As if speaking out loud had become too hard—too painful—for him, Roman’s voice filled my mind. We were ambushed. The rebels in Mendosia attacked while we slept...

Nausea roiled up my throat, saliva coating my tongue in a bitter taste. That didn’t answer my question. He wasn’t answering my question. Why wasn’t he answering my question?

“I was the only survivor,” Roman rasped at last. “I’m sorry.”

I blinked.

Only survivor.

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The words hovered over me, not quite touching for several long moments. I took a small, unsteady step backward and shook my head. “N-No... No, there must be a mistake.”

“Aria,” a vaguely-familiar male voice called. One of the healers I’d worked with over the past few weeks placed a hand on my shoulder. “We need to treat Alpha Roman. Help or leave.”

I didn’t move, keeping my eyes on the alpha alone. “No. I don’t believe you. Roman, your brother—” Someone started to haul me backward. “Tell me it isn’t true! Malik isn’t—” I couldn’t speak the word. “I would know!”

My words became a garbled mess, desperation causing my voice to rise in pitch as they forced me away from our alpha. Another nurse immediately took my place, blocking Roman from view. My vision became hazy with tears, my head light as I lost the ability to breathe—to function.

“I’ll take her,” Estelle’s gentle voice echoed somewhere behind me.

“Get her out of here,” someone growled as I struggled against my captor. The pressure on my chest became unbearable, and I was certain I’d crack in half. I wanted to crack in half.

Estelle’s comforting arms enveloped me, and I nearly crumbled to the floor. Somehow, she managed to pull me away from the chaos of the main room and into a private room they used for more intense procedures. As soon as the door shut behind us, she released her hold on me, and I fell into a heap on the floor. Curling in on

myself, my body trembled as I clutched my stomach.

I didn't believe it. Malik couldn't be... Hewasn't...

The bond remained. I couldfeelour bond. I just couldn't feelhim.

"Be strong, Aria," Estelle murmured, rubbing comforting circles on the center of my back. "Malik's child will need you to remain strong."

His child.A ragged sob ripped from my chest, and I shook my head again and again.

"Calm now," she coached, a note of urgency in her tone. "This is not good for your health, my dear."

Not good for my health?I wanted to scream at her that I didn't care. That my health—my entirelife—was forfeit the moment Malik's heart stopped beating.

Precious weeks. I'd been given preciousweekswith my fated mate, and I cursed the Moon Goddess for taking him from me. I'd damn her to the deepest ring of hell if I could, just so she might experience a fraction of the pain I felt in that moment.

When I failed to calm, Estelle stood, and I became faintly aware of her rummaging around in the drawers and cabinets behind me. I remained a trembling, sobbing lump on the cold hard floor. She returned to my side a moment later.

The resounding pain in the center of my body nearly blocked out the sharp pinch at my neck as Estelle injected me with some serum. When the darkness settled over me, I cried Malik's name.

I wokein a vaguely familiar bed.

They'd taken me to Malik's quarters in the pack house rather than the cottage. I knew because I'd already awoken thrice before, only to be injected with the sleep serum when the pain became too much to bear once more.

This time, a certain degree of numbness thrummed in my chest. I felt disconnected from myself, like my body remained in the physical realm while my soul floated a thousand miles away. With Malik, no doubt.

Dead. He was gone.

It was the only explanation for the utter absence on the other side of our mate bond. I'd come to the conclusion that the chord between us still existed for the sole purpose of guiding my soul back to his when I joined him in the afterlife.

Slowly, I pushed into a seated position. My eyes ached, swollen and red from endless grief. My limbs felt stiff and weak, scarcely capable of holding my torso upright in bed, and my throat scratched from nights spent mourning his loss.

A figure at the corner of the room shot up. Gio. "Miss Aria, you're awake!"

Through the fog in my head, I recalled that the young man had been sitting in the same chair each time I woke up over the last few days. He was stoically devoted to his cause of protecting me—the last order that Malik gave him.

Malik. A fresh wave of misery washed over me, but my eyes were no longer capable of producing tears. I clutched at my stomach, at the baby that I prayed still grew there despite my neglect, and tried to speak.

"W-water," I croaked, looking to the bedside table where an untouched glass waited for me. I extended a hand, but my fingers trembled and couldn't grasp the cup.

“Of course.” Gio rushed over, taking the glass for me and bringing it to my lips. “Careful. Estelle said to begin slowly.”

The room-temperature liquid wet my lips, a single mouthful sliding down my throat and soothing the rawness. I tried to guzzle another gulp, but Gio gently pulled the glass away and set it on the side table once more.

“I’ll tell Estelle that you’re awake,” Gio reported. “She’ll want to come check you, then I will bring you a plate of food.”

The trembling threatened to pick up again, but my stomach groaned at the mention of food. That was a good sign, I supposed. “H-How long...?”

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Gio seemed to understand my question. “You’ve been sleeping on and off for four days. The pack is in an uproar, preparing to go to battle against the Mendosian rebels.”

The Mendosian rebels. The territory that Roman claimed had defected from the Intonat Nocte Pack’s sovereignty. The ones who supposedly slaughtered Malik and the rest of the patrol, leaving only Alpha Roman alive.

I dipped my chin in a nod. I’d gone numb, unbothered by the thought of war. If the Mendosian pack truly murdered my mate, they deserved whatever fate waited for them.

“Estelle will be here soon,” Gio murmured, pulling one of the blankets higher over my waist, as if that might quell my tremors. “I’ll go fetch the food.”

Again, I nodded, never quite looking the young soldier in the eye. Soon, he swept out of the room and left me alone once more. I stared blankly ahead, seeing but not seeing the thin layer of dust covering the wardrobe on the opposite side of the room.

Though the space lacked any of Malik’s personal belongings, if I inhaled deep, I could smell his comforting scent lingering in the air. Slowly, I rolled onto my side, burying my face in one of the pillows and breathing him into my lungs. The familiar combination of mint and tobacco leaf simultaneously broke my soul and soothed the shattered pieces.

A knock sounded at the bedroom door, but I didn’t rise, even when the knob turned. I assumed Estelle had come to run her check-up.

Except, the footsteps were slow and heavy, and the air in the room shifted. I looked up in time to see Alpha Roman stop midway between the bed and the door. He wore a t-shirt and jeans, though bandages peeked beyond his t-shirt and up his neck, where the worst of his injuries had been. Faded green bruises marred his symmetrical features.

Gio said you'd woken up, he said through our pack bond, his voice a painstakingly gentle echo. It sounded wrong.

I glared at him and seethed. "Get out of my head."

I didn't want to hear him in the place where I'd last heard Malik, as if using the mental bonds to speak to others might override the memory of him.

His eyebrows rose in surprise, but he heeded my growled order. "I wanted to check on you. To answer any questions you might have and..." Roman cleared his throat. "Estelle told me that you are with child."

Instinctively, his mention of my baby set me on edge. My muscles tensed, readying to fight to protect my young. Without Malik here to protect us, it would not be unheard of for Roman to try to dispatch of his brother's heir to safeguard his own line of succession...

As if he could read my unease, Roman's eyes flared wide and he lifted both hands in the universal sign of surrender. "Goddess, I will not harm you, Aria. Despite what you believe, I'm not a child-murderer."

I didn't believe him, nor did I relax.

His throat bobbed. "Malik saved my life. We were attacked while we slept, completely overpowered. We fought them off for as long as we could, but..." He

trailed off, and I swore I saw tears well on the surface of his eyes. “He saved me. Gave me enough time to escape the rebels and run home. And in our last communication...”

I felt sick. I didn’t want to hear more but also hung on to every word. I couldn’t detect deception in his voice, but I’d also never been skilled at reading liars.

Roman lowered his head. “He asked me to protect you. To keep you safe and cared for, as if you were my own.”

Emotion clogged my throat, a strange combination of fear and heartbreak and revulsion. I hated every word that Malik’s brother spoke, but if he spoke the truth... Did Malik truly ask Roman to protect me? Is this really what he wanted?

“You’re lying,” I whispered, my voice a hoarse shell of itself. “You hated Malik, and you hate me.”

He blinked. “I did many things I’m not proud of, but I owe Malik my life. The least I can do is ensure that his mate and child are safe.”

The bitter taste in my mouth worsened. “I will not stay here without him. I-I can’t. Let me return to my father.”

“This was his dying wish,” Roman answered, his voice remaining even and calm. “He knew there would be a target on your back, since there are those who are loyal to me who would hunt you and your child down to prevent any question about the line of succession.”

I shook my head, but he continued. “If I accept you as my Luna and assume the child as my own, no one will question a thing.”

Clamping my eyes shut, I drew my knees into my chest as if that might hold me together and keep me from breaking. I would've lost my stomach many times over if I had any food in its depths.

"I'd rather die than be your Luna," I whispered, a single tear spilling from the corner of my eye as I glared at him.

A muscle in his jaw dipped, the only sign of his displeasure. "And what of your pup?"

His words hit me like a blow to the gut, knocking the air from my lungs. Was that a threat? A gentle reminder?

If I refused his offer, I sentenced the child—Malik's child—to certain death. This babe was all I had left of him.

To protect it, I could endure anything.

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“You swear to protect this child with your life?” I held his gaze, and the sincerity within his eyes did little to quell my innate hatred for this male.

“Like my own.”

Slowly, I rose from the bed. The soles of my feet prickled and ached as I took small steps toward Roman. When I reached him, I extended my hand between us. I didn’t flinch when he took it.

“Then I accept.”

28

MALIK

After all I endured in my life, I always imagined death would have the decency to greet me quickly. I deserved the mercy of a quick death. At least, that was what I thought.

Death, the sick bastard, clearly didn’t agree.

I hovered, suspended in the strange rift between life and death. Not quite existing, but not ceasing to exist, either. Mind separated from body. No feeling. No pain. No sights or sounds or smells.

At times, the temptation to surrender to the vast nothingness became too great to ignore. But every time I dared give up, a flash of a memory resurfaced, quick as a

lightning bolt from the sky, reminding me of the happiest weeks of my life.

In those moments, I only saw Aria.

Her face. Her smile. The sound of her laughter, ringing in my ears long after the sight of her vanished from my dying mind. Those were the moments that gave me a reason to hold on, at least for a while longer.

I was growingsick of the darkness.

Sometimes, I thought I heard voices, but when I tried to open my eyes, my mind felt disconnected from my body. Other times, in the impenetrable shroud of shadows, a skittering of agony sliced through my being, reminding me of my unfortunate predicament.

Somewhere in the depths of my mind, I began to remember what happened to place me in this endless purgatory. Again, it only came in flashes.

I'd been asleep, my dreams transporting me to my bedroom in the cottage, where my little dove curled into my side. But I never slept deeply, especially not while on the road. A faint rustling by my head ripped me from my slumber. That small warning might've been the only reason I still teetered between the world of the living and the dead.

I'd opened my eyes in time to find a familiar gaze staring back at me. Cruel. Cynical. Angry. Eyes that had tormented me for years, but I'd been foolish to believe it would never come to this...Roman.

I fought back against my brother, but even I could not defy the odds. Five fully-grown warriors against one rightful alpha.

My vision turned bloody. Every fiber of my being centered on survival. I wanted to survive, almost as much as I wanted to kill every wolf that turned against me. And yet, when the darkness took me, I sensed in my gut that Roman escaped.

Perhapsthatexplained why death had not yet collected my soul. The stubborn thing refused to die while my evil brother lived.

In the never-ending darkness, I imagined his death. Bloody. Slow.

Even so, it wasn't the need for revenge that kept me hanging on. It was her.

Alwaysher.

“Samah!” A young female voice pierced through the haze of nothingness. It grated, causing my head to pound like a drum between my temples. “Samah, come quickly! I think he's waking up.”

I ground my teeth together, biting back the urge to throttle the owner of the ear-splitting voice. Moon Goddess, my head felt seconds away from shattering into a thousand pieces.

Rusty hinges creaked, followed by the sound of rushing footsteps.

“Come away from him now, Myra,” an older, softer female voice warned. “Call Alpha Amir. Tell him to bring guards, just in case.”

A lighter pair of footsteps scurried away, fading into silence.

Guards? Alpha Amir? Where the hells was I?

The question peaked my interest enough that I tried to open my eyes. I struggled to

find the connection between my mind and my eyelids, willing the small muscles to act on my command. Sluggishly, they obeyed.

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Pain erupted behind the eye socket of my good side. A single lamp illuminated the room, but it hurt like I stared directly into the sun.

Panic settled over my chest as I took in the unfamiliar surroundings.

I laid on a bed, my wrists bound to the mattress like a damned prisoner. Freshly changed bandages covered my bare arms, and needles inserted into the veins on the back of my hands. A clean bedsheet covered my abdomen. It eased the edge of my unease.

An old woman stood at the foot of the bed, a gentle smile gracing her wrinkled lips. "Praise the Moon Goddess," she chuckled. "We weren't sure you'd ever wake up."

I stiffened, my lips cracking open to ask who she was, but no sound came out. Right. How could I have forgotten?

I narrowed my eyes at the graying woman and attempted to sit up in the bed, but any attempt at movement failed. My muscles were too weak.

"You are quite a fighter," she cooed, stepping closer to my bed. "There were times when I thought you'd given up, but then something would change, and your heart would strengthen once more."

In an instant, I knew the moments that she spoke of. The moments when Aria's memory shattered the black night and rekindled my will to live and return to her. Aria.

My eyes flared wide. Aria. My little dove. My mate.

Where was she? I needed to find her. If Roman had indeed survived, she needed my protection more than ever. Did she think I was dead? Had he tried to kill her as well? Instinct had me diving into myself, searching for the bond we once shared. I found the tattered threads of our connection, but when I speared down the cord that bridged between us...Nothing.

Pain, more potent than any physical ailment, ripped through me like a blade. Panic flared anew, and, this time, it gave me the power to thrash against the bands that kept me tethered to the bed.

“Easy, alpha!” The old woman—Samah, I believed—cried, stretching her hands out to calm me. “You have been asleep for too many months. You will only hurt yourself...”

I stopped listening to her, dread curdling deep in my stomach.

Months?

29

ARIA

Four months later...

Sometimes, I thought I could feel him again.

Not physically—like when I closed my eyes and imagined his hands on my body, his teeth grazing his mark at the base of my neck—but in the depths of my being. It came as a phantom stirring in my soul, a barely-traceable caress deep on the far side of our bond. Our bond that remained, even in death.

At first, that ever-present bond tortured me. Too often, I found myself diving down the invisible tether that connected our souls and violently searching for some semblance of life on the other end. I never found anything.

Now, the tattered remnants of our bond served as a reminder that, one day, I'd be with Malik again. A reminder that even death could not separate us, and my soul would find his in the afterlife.

But, as I curled on my side in the bed I once shared with him and rubbed my swollen belly, I swore I felt a gentle brush down the splintered cords of us.

I stiffened, every muscle in my body locking up as I waited for another touch. Another anything. There was only a small kick against my ribcage that soothed a fraction of the disappointment and grief that threatened to shatter me every day.

Smiling, I rubbed the spot where Malik's pup liked to nudge me a few times every hour. She'd grown so much in the last few months. It wouldn't be long now. Werewolves experienced shorter pregnancies than humans, mainly due to their accelerated growth rates and longer bones.

A knock sounded at the bedroom door, and I slowly pushed up into a seated position. My legs hung over the side of the bed as I took a deep breath and mustered the courage to rise another day.

For her—for Malik's pup—I would.

My visitor knocked again, louder this time.

"I'm coming," I growled through gritted teeth. I knew who waited on the other side.

Roman received a missive from the alpha of a small nomadic pack yesterday. The

pack, no more than thirty shifters strong and utterly incapable of defending themselves should Roman decide he wanted to destroy the competition, agreed to swear fealty to him. They'd promised to arrive by nightfall to swear fealty to him.

When I opened the door, Roman's scowling face greeted me.

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“Are you well rested?” he bit out, clearly unamused by my decision to take a mid-afternoon nap prior to such a momentous occasion.

I didn’t bother answering. He didn’t care about whether I had a good nap, and we both knew it.

To Roman’s credit, he tried to remain civil in the months following his brother’s death. For the first few weeks, he tended to me with painstaking patience and gentleness. But, as the weeks bled into months and I refused to sufficiently fall into his arms, his kindness ran dry.

Granted, I didn’t make it easy for him. I performed the absolute bare minimum in my duties as his Luna. Just enough to maintain Roman’s protection for my pup.

We kept separate bedrooms, thank the Moon Goddess. He never attempted to act upon the desire I’d seen shimmering behind his eyes on more than one occasion, likely because he knew I’d try to kill him if he tried. He only forced me to interact with him for pack business.

I still didn’t fully believe the story he told about the night Malik died.

“I don’t understand why I have to come today,” I mumbled, wrapping my robe—an item I’d retrieved from the cottage that bore Malik’s scent—tight across my front.

Roman’s lips pressed in a flat line, a muscle in his jaw twitching.

“Because you are my Luna,” he explained, repeating the same words I’d heard

countless times before. “And we need this new pack to view us as a united front.”

I barely contained my eye roll. “Fine. I’ll be down shortly.”

“See that you are,” he warned, the words clipped and too-forced to be considered anything but a threat. “They’ll be arriving in?—”

I doubled over, some invisible force sweeping through me like a bolt of electricity. I gasped, but not from pain—there was nothing painful about the sensation. It was strange and overwhelming and vaguely familiar. And beautiful.

“Aria?” Roman demanded, brows lowered in concern. His hand clamped on my shoulder, and I nearly recoiled at the contact. “Are you alright?”

The abrupt feeling vanished as quickly as it came, but not before I traced its source. It came from... my mate bond.

Malik? I shouted into our connection, but only my echo responded.

My pulse thundered in my temple, drowning out the world around me. I slowly stood upright, pressing my hand to the center of my belly and shaking my head.

“Sorry,” I breathed, half-convinced that I was losing my mind. “It’s the baby. She kicked me.”

Roman muttered a curse under his breath, eyeing my rounded stomach with a heavy dose of apprehension. He shook his head and turned away from my room. “Try not to do that when the pack arrives,” he called over his shoulder. “Ten minutes, Aria.”

“Thanks, asshole,” I whispered, stepping back inside my bedroom and shutting the door.

It was only when I was alone once more that I realized my fingers were trembling, my lungs heaving for breath. I'd felt it. Felthim. Like, for the briefest moment, the floodgates of our bond opened, and a tsunami swept over me with violent force.

All the grief, all the longing and hope and despair from the last few months, had poured over me. It'd nearly brought me to my knees. Then, it disappeared.

What in the hells was happening to me?

Ten minutes later, I carefully stepped out of the pack house, still not entirely trusting my legs to carry me after what just happened.

I wore a loose dress long enough to brush my ankles, hiding the extent of my pregnancy and the faint wobbling of my knees. One look in the mirror before exiting my room told me that the blood had long-since rushed from my cheeks. I looked like I'd seen a ghost. Or, rather, felt one.

Gio accompanied me outside. He never strayed far, ever-devoted to his role as my personal guardian. Though I doubted he could do much if someone had their mind set on killing me and my unborn child, I enjoyed his company. He, in addition to Emerson and my father, when he was allowed to visit, convinced me to leave the comfort of my bedroom day after day.

"It seems we're late," I hummed, eyeing the clearing where a large group of wolves and humans had gathered. Roman stood at the center, flanked by an innumerable number of our largest warriors.

An old man stood directly opposite him, appearing frail and wrinkled by comparison. His skin was dark, his hair white with age, though his eyes shone with quiet resilience. He stared at Roman like a piece of dirt stuck to the bottom of his shoe, and I decided I liked this old man.

With my chin tilted high and shoulders back, I approached the clearing. The old man's eyes flickered to me when I took my spot by Roman's side.

"Ah, here she is," Roman announced, feigned pleasure coating the words. "Alpha Amir, this is my Luna, Aria."

The whites of the old man's eyes expanded in the slightest, and his brow lifted in surprise.

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Did I not look like a Luna? Or, perhaps he could sense my pregnancy and the subsequent lack of Roman's scent on my body? Regardless, I offered him a genuine smile and dipped my head in greeting. "Welcome, Alpha Amir. It's a pleasure to—"

He interrupted me with three croaked words. "You are pregnant?"

I froze, my hand instantly landing on the top of my bump. The pup within fluttered at my touch. Beside me, Roman shifted indiscernibly closer, and I was actually grateful for his presence.

I didn't like the way Amir watched me, like my next words might seal his opinion of me forever. I held his gaze, never balking, and cocked my head.

"Yes," I answered, not bothering to offer any further explanation.

Amir hummed, contemplative, then nodded toward Roman. "And the pup... It is this male's?"

My mouth cracked open, but I couldn't force the lie off my tongue.

Hadn't my deal with Roman been for this exact purpose? I agreed to be his Luna so he would claim Malik's child as his own, protecting it from those who would rather see it dead. I should've answered automatically. Should've sought refuge closer to Roman's side, like any real Luna would do when a rival alpha stared at her like she was a villain.

"Of course it's mine," Roman seethed, answering for me.

He wrapped an arm around my back and pulled me into his side, placing a protective hand on my belly. Regret twisted in my chest, but I managed to keep myself from shifting away.

I dropped my gaze from Amir's, but not before I saw a flash of surprise and disappointment in his dark brown eyes.

The old alpha took a small step backward, clasping his hands neatly together. He eyed me warily, and the werewolves at his back shifted. "Is that the truth, girl?"

He stared at me like he knew it wasn't.

Fear skittered down my spine. Not for myself or the pack, but for the defenseless babe in my womb. For her, I'd swallow down this lie.

"Y-yes."

And then I felt it.

Pain, unlike anything I'd ever felt before, shot through the center of my chest. It erupted from deep inside of me, like a knife had been plunged straight through my sternum and into my heart. It consumed me, enraged me, broke me.

"Ah!" I fell to my knees, clutching at my heart like that might stop it from shattering into a million pieces.

No weapon protruded from my chest. My body remained intact.

This pain came from somewhere deep inside of me. From my soul. And I knew, even as the depths of heartbreak rippled through me like the aftershocks of an earthquake, this pain wasn't my own.

A low growl rumbled through the clearing. Death incarnate. Violence personified.

No—not through the clearing. It permeated through my mind.

My eyes flared wide as they searched the crowd of werewolves in front of me. Slowly, they parted, and a monstrous wolf emerged from the forest behind them.

My soul recognized itself and rejoiced.

Malik.

30

ARIA

The world descended into chaos around me, but I couldn't rip my eyes away from the ghost in front of me. My mate.

My veryun-dead mate.

For a moment, I didn't believe my eyes. Too many times over the past few months, my mind played cruel tricks on me. It conjured images and scents and sounds that played on my grief and tortured me.

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And yet, with every passing second, Malik remained.

He stalked forward. Lean muscles rippled beneath a grey and red-tinged coat. He'd lost weight but still towered over every other wolf in the clearing. His eye flared wild, his jowls curled back over impossibly long, sharp teeth.

I saw no trace of the man within the beast.

"M-Malik?" I whispered, my lips trembling and stumbling over his name.

No answer.

I turned inward, seeking him out within our mate bond, but I only met an indiscernible cacophony of agony and pain and betrayal. It pierced through me with renewed vigor, growing more and more crippling with every prowled step closer.

But I felt him. He was alive. And that meant everything.

I scrambled to my feet, dirt clinging to my hands and dress. I needed to get to him. Needed to confirm that this was real—that he was here and alive and mine. Needed to introduce him to his daughter.

My first steps forward were shaky, my knees wobbling and body numb from shock.

"Malik!" I screamed above the clamor around me, shoving past a broad-shouldered guard.

I hadn't noticed the uproar in the crowd. Several Intonat Nocteguards crowded around Roman and, consequently, me, but an air of unease hung over the clearing. In fact, most of the pack took slow, careful steps away from their alpha. Away from the center of the clearing. Away from Malik.

"No..." Roman whispered from somewhere behind me. Disbelief coated every word. "No, it isn't possible."

Malik! I cried into our bond, pushing another Intonat Noctewolf out of my way. Malik, I'm here. Please!

My mate's massive head swung in my direction, his nostrils flaring. For the fraction of a second, the fury coursing through our bond—pouring from his body into my own—fractured to allow a brush of devotion to caress me. That brief reprieve filled my lungs with renewed hope, and I started to run forward.

I didn't make it far.

A pair of hands clamped down on my shoulders—hard—yanking my body back to the center of the clearing and the protective circle the Intonat Nocteguards had formed around Roman.

"No!" I seethed, fighting against the strong arms corralling me. "Let me go to him. Now."

The guards paid me no mind, their attention solely focused on Malik's approaching figure.

For the first time, I realized that the wolves from Alpha Amir's pack now flanked Malik. They filled the space behind him, nipping at any enemy that dared step too close to him. Even Alpha Amir watched Malik approach with something like

smug satisfaction glimmering in his dark eyes.

“There is only one alpha” Amir croaked, a smirk playing on his thin lips as he turned his gaze back to Roman. “That my pack means to swear fealty to. And it is not you.”

“What the fuck is happening?” Roman trembled with barely suppressed rage. “Kill him! Kill them all!”

He pointed at Malik, who was close enough now that I noted several gruesome scars stretching across his wolf’s flanks and chest. Patches of fur were missing where the skin turned into a mangled mess.

And, despite Roman’s shouted orders, the Intonate Noctewarriors hesitated. Their general had seemingly returned from the dead, and vengeance rolled off him in oppressive waves. Sheer self-preservation kept Roman’s own warriors from moving.

Roman’s head swiveled, his eyes widening in fear. I saw the moment he realized that his warriors hadn’t moved. Some even slinked away, their bellies lowered to the ground in a show of subservience to Malik.

Pride flared in my chest, and I grappled with the guard that held me. This time, he released me, and a smile split my face.

Malik, I’m coming. I love you and?—

The cold touch of metal through the fabric of my dress caused my words to falter. I recognized the bite of steel, pressing dangerously against the swell of my stomach. Right above where I’d felt my daughter move just moments ago. A knife.

I froze.

“Take one more step, brother, and I’ll spill her guts where we stand,” Roman seethed, his breath hot and wet against my ear. “I’ll cut your pup out and hand-deliver it to you.”

He pressed the knife harder against the lower portion of my belly, where the curve of my swollen stomach met my hip, and I cried out at the pinch of the blade against my skin. It sliced through my dress, digging relentlessly into skin. Just the flick of his wrist would cut me open.

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Malik stopped, the muscles beneath his peppered coat vibrating with an inaudible growl. His eyes, once brimming with unrestrained violence, now solely watched the knife in his brother's hand, and a flash of fear struck down our bond.

I didn't move—didn't dare to even breathe. Silent tears poured from my eyes, but I fought to keep my shoulders from shaking with the sobs that threatened to rack through me. As if sensing my distress, the pup—the one shred of hope and joy in my life over the last several months—wiggled inside my womb.

Then, I heard it.

The most beautiful, terrifying sound. Malik's voice, filling my mind, in a low, raspy snarl. Let her go.

Every shifter—human and wolf alike—tensed throughout the clearing. His voice must've penetrated every mind, carrying the unmistakable authority of an alpha. The rightful alpha.

Roman's lips pulled back over his teeth, and he laughed, cruel and raucous. "So you can kill me? I don't fucking think so, monster."

I'm issuing a formal challenge for the Intonat Nocte Pack, Malik warned, risking a single, small step closer. You must face me. Your fight is with me, not Aria.

At my back, Roman stiffened. Like a coward, he shook his head and laughed again, though unease slipped into the sound. I will not fight you. You're no alpha. You're nothing.

“Guards!” Roman shouted, his voice an octave higher than normal. “Kill this male! Kill every outsider. Now!”

I held my breath. Again, no one moved.

In fact, some of the Noctemembers turned their glares and snarls on Roman. To refuse a formal challenge was treasonous to the very laws that bound our kind. It went against every rule, every sacred tradition. Not to mention, it betrayed Roman’s rotten soul. His cowardice.

His unworthiness.

Release her, Malik demanded again, the words echoing like thunder between my ears.

Roman’s hand shook, the blade digging into my stomach as his control wavered. No.

Malik’s responding snarl earned a handful of whimpers from wolves throughout the clearing. Their natural instincts warned them to obey and serve the strongest among them. At last, they realized that was not Roman.

Something warm dripped down my abdomen, trickling down my thighs and staining my dress. Roman cut me. The wound wasn’t deep. Not yet.

Still, Malik stopped his slow ascent. Wild fear ran rampant in his gaze.

“Here’s what we’re going to do,” Roman warned, his breathing ragged and shallow. “Sweet Aria and I are going to go for a walk. Along with us. No one will follow us.”

Snarls and growls of discontent flooded the clearing, but Roman continued.

“You all will wait an hour before leaving this clearing,” he demanded. “Then

and only then, will you come looking for her. By that time, I'll be long gone, and Aria will be safe. You can have this damn pack. You have my word. Do we have a deal, brother?"

Malik's gaze flickered to mine, just for a moment.

No, I whispered into our bond, careful not to broadcast the word to the entire pack. Don't trust him, Malik. He?—

Malik shuddered, and the depths of his love for me radiated through our souls' tether. When his voice filled my mind again, he spoke to the entire clearing. No. Let her go, and you have my word that I will not kill you. I will let you live, but you will leave and never return.

The knife eased from my stomach, and I could practically smell the relief leaking from Roman's body. "You swear it? Swear it on your pup's life. You will not harm me."

A long, pregnant pause. Malik dipped his big head once. I swear it.

At last, Roman's knife fell away. He shoved me forward, and I barely managed to catch myself on my hands before colliding with the hard ground. My entire body protested at the rough treatment, but I scrambled away from the unhinged coward, desperate to reach Malik's side.

I crawled halfway to him. When I looked up again, his wolf no longer stood in front of me. He'd shifted into his human form. His naked body held so many new scars—horrific, brutal scars that twisted and marred his chest and abdomen, his neck and face. He looked skinnier but stood tall, dominating the clearing despite the obvious extent of his injuries from months ago.

He was here. And he was mine.

A ragged sob slipped from my lips as he rushed to meet me, falling to the ground in front of me. My body sang as he wrapped his arms around me, hauling me into his bare chest. His scent washed over me, tobacco leaf and mint, and I wanted to drown in it.

Aria. Aria. Aria, he whispered like a man possessed. His hands grappled with me, like he wouldn't be satisfied until our bodies melded into one.

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I buried my face in his neck, tasting salt from my tears and him. My heart felt close to bursting through my chest, and our pup...

Our daughter rolled and kicked inside of me, as if she knew that her sire had finally come back to us. As if she knew our family was complete at last.

Absolute bliss consumed me. I could stay there for eternity, wrapped in Malik's arms and reveling in the steady beat of his heart against mine. The feel of his naked skin, warm and full of life, beneath my palms.

But Malik stiffened, and I remembered the hoard of shifters surrounding us. Our reunion would have to wait.

A low growl filled my mind, penetrating the thoughts of every werewolf in the clearing, and I recognized the sound as an alpha—the true Alpha of the In-tonat Noctepack—preparing to levy his first command.

When I looked up, Malik's gaze rested on Roman. The male had transformed into his wolf form, undoubtedly prepared to run far, far away, but countless wolves surrounded him, nipping at his heels and keeping him in place.

He snarled and snapped his jaws as he searched for an escape, then glared at Malik. You gave me your word.

I gave you my word that I would not kill you, brother, Malik rumbled, and a wicked smirk curled on his full lips. But I've learned from my mistakes.

No! Roman shouted, but it was overshadowed by the resounding authority of Malik's first command to his pack.

Kill him.

31

MALIK

The sound of Roman's death followed me away from the clearing, through the doors to the pack house and into the nearest empty room.

When I first gave the order, he fought his slaughter. Eventually, his snarls transformed into howls, which turned into yelps and whimpers. The noise of gurgling blood and tearing flesh continued long after Roman's cries ceased.

I couldn't bring myself to care.

Whatever loyalty—whatever devotion—I'd felt for my kin disappeared the moment he turned on me. The moment he decided I'd become a liability and his rule would be more secure if he killed me. The moment he decided he wanted my mate for himself.

That was Roman's downfall.

I would've followed him to my dying breath. Not because I loved him or even liked him, but because I'd given him my word. Because loyalty meant something to me.

It meant nothing to him.

I would not mourn my treacherous brother. I'd wipe the remnants of him from my

life—from my pack. I'd reverse the darkness he'd instilled over the world and become the alpha he never could've been. His name—his words, his legacy—would disappear.

“Malik?”

Aria's voice reached into the depths of my frenzied mind, coaxing me from the darkness that had shrouded my soul from the moment I woke up months ago.

My eyes clamped tight, and I took a deep, shuddering breath before opening them again. I trembled, my control teetering on a precarious edge. With another deep breath, I grounded myself in reality.

Aria was here. I held her in my arms. My mate. My pregnant mate.

Tears streamed down her cheeks. More welled in her bright eyes. Dark circles marred the space beneath them, and she looked skinnier despite the pup in her belly.

Goddess, I'd nearly shattered upon hearing Roman's haughty claim that Aria carried his child. Until that moment, I'd been biding my time and waiting for the perfect moment to levy my challenge. Then, Aria confirmed it, and I exploded. The careful walls I'd constructed between our bond fell, and every ounce of agony unleashed itself into the cord that tethered my soul to hers.

The residue of that agony still clung to my heart. It gave birth to panic and fear that, at any moment, I might wake up and Aria would no longer be mine.

That fear overshadowed any control I'd been holding to, and I hauled Aria against me, claiming her lips in a brutal display of possession. She gasped, opening her mouth in silent compliance as if she knew I needed this. Knew I needed to reassure myself that she was here and mine, mine?—

Mine,I growled into our bond, the only thought I could fully comprehend.

Aria wove her delicate fingers into my hair, then slid her hands down my naked chest. Her digits shook as they trailed over the gruesome scars I'd earned in my fight against Roman and his cronies.

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Instinct drove my actions. A desperate, primal need to claim her and reunite our souls.

Claws protruded from the ends of my fingernails as I reached for the neckline of her dress and ripped the fabric from top to bottom. It fell away from her body with featherlight grace. A soft whimper slipped from Aria's lips at the sudden exposure, and her arms flew to cover her breasts and swollen stomach.

My eyes flared as I took in the sight of her. If I inhaled deep, I could still smell my scent on her—inher. Though Roman had poisoned my mind with doubt, there was no denying that the pup was mine. Mine.

Mypup.

Newfound need swept through me, and I advanced on my little dove. Gently, I pried her arms away from her body and forced her to reveal herself to me again. She didn't resist, slowly allowing her arms to fall to her sides. Her nipples were hard and pebbled, rosy peaks atop substantial, vein-covered mounds, and goosebumps peppered every inch of her milky skin.

Goddess, I whispered and fell to my knees.

My hands found her stomach, fingers spreading wide to encompass as much of the globe as possible. Awe swelled in my chest, and I leaned forward to brush a kiss just below her navel.

Aria sniffed, and I looked up to see fresh tears spilling from the corners of her eyes.

Devastating joy brimmed in her gaze, but it couldn't hide the fissures of heartbreak lingering beneath.

I pulled back, though my hands still cradled her belly. Aria...

She shook her head, lips trembling. "H-How? I-I-I couldn't feel you. Our bond... Our bond went silent. B-But you were alive!"

I felt her pain as surely as it was my own. It was. Our souls were one and the same.

I know. I know. I pressed another kiss to her stomach, soothing. And I'm sorry. It was the only way, little dove.

"You let me think," she hiccuped, "you were dead!"

I had to, I tried explaining, desperation leaking into our bond. I hated every second of it, my love. But I was gravely injured. I needed time to heal and regain my strength without Roman realizing that I lived. He would've sent an army to destroy me, and I needed time to prepare to challenge him.

"I wouldn't have told him!" Aria cried, shaking her head again. "I could've come to you. I could have helped?—"

Your pain made it real. And it had. Roman had no inkling that I lived. He truly believed that he'd killed me. Aria... I'm sorry.

My plan worked perfectly, until the moment Roman refused my challenge. I'd underestimated his cowardice.

She bit her lip in an attempt to stifle her sobs, and I tried to comfort her with a brush of warmth down our bond. Aria answered by lowering to her knees, joining me on the

ground. I rose up to bridge the distance between us, but she leaned back before I could reunite our lips.

You will never shut me out again, she warned, her words a command I couldn't have disobeyed if I tried.

I nodded, caressing her red, wet cheeks. Never. I promised, then cemented it with a kiss. Never again.

Another kiss, then another.

Short brushes of our lips morphed into wet, salty kisses that healed every shattered and broken piece of my soul. Aria crawled into my lap, though her rounded stomach made it difficult, and our bodies strained to remove any gap of space between us. Seconds bled into minutes, and the world beyond these four walls faded away.

Soon, we tumbled into a heap of skin and desire on the thick rug. We laid on our sides, Aria enveloped against my front as I lifted her leg and sheathed myself so deep inside her body that I could not tell where she ended and I began.

"I love you," she chanted with every slow, thorough thrust. My lips latched on the mark on her neck, and she broke apart, muscles spasming around me.

Seconds later, I followed her over the edge. Seed poured forth from my tip, seeping from the place where our bodies locked together. Again and again, release barreled through me, reigniting every time I thought I might be finished.

Minutes or hours later, we were a quivering mess. Our kisses became slow and lazy. Our breathing eased, and my swollen base slackened enough that I could've pulled out of her. I didn't dare.

She kissed me over her shoulder one last time, then rested her head on my arm extended beneath her. “We’re having a little girl,” she whispered, nuzzling her nose against the crook of my arm.

My heart skipped. A girl?

She nodded, skating a hand lovingly over her stomach. “I owe her everything. When I thought you were dead, I wanted to join you... She’s the only reason—the only thing that kept me here.”

Fissures spread through my chest at Aria’s heartbreaking admission.

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Then I owe our daughter my life. There is nothing for me in this world apart from you, Aria. And now our pup. My hand covered Aria's, and I silently sent a prayer of thanks to the Moon Goddess for the miracle growing within.

What of the pack? Her words were quiet in my mind. They are yours now, too.

I stiffened.

I'd known for months that I'd return to the Intonat Nocte Pack and challenge Roman. I'd been preparing for months to reclaim my birthright. I cared for the pack. I would protect them and lead them. I'd lead them into a time of prosperity and peace, something they'd known nothing of for years.

But my heart did not beat for the pack.

I would gladly burn this pack to ashes if you wished it, I murmured, the words solemn but true. I'd run away from my duty. I'd abandon them in a heartbeat if it meant keeping you safe. I swept my thumb over her smooth skin, where her stomach felt much firmer. I swore I felt movement within, and my affection swelled. Both of you.

She smiled, lifting her head to place a lingering kiss on my lips again. Then it's a good thing I don't wish for you to do that. Her soft chuckle drifted through our bond. You'll be a wonderful alpha, Malik. The alpha this pack deserves.

I grunted. There's much that needs to be changed... Beginning with the packs Roman conquered in the last few years.

What will you do with them? Aria wondered, stroking her hand up and down my arm as we embraced.

Release them, I answered. That included her own father's pack. Should they wish it. I'll help them rebuild and promise protection in the process.

She hummed. See? You're already proving yourself worthy of them.

I only care about being worthy of you. I peppered another kiss to her shoulder and rolled onto my back. And our daughter. I want to make her proud. Want to be the father I never had.

She'll love you, Malik. Aria followed me, gingerly turning until she curled into my side, her head resting on my chest. Just as I love you.

And she did. I felt it as surely as I felt my own heart beat in my chest.

Aria—my beautiful little dove. My mate. Myluna.

The woman who waltzed into my life and reignited a sense of purpose. Who touched me despite the scars of my past. Who listened to me when I could not speak. Who helped me find my voice after a lifetime of silence.

Should we go back outside? she murmured, even as she nuzzled deeper into my side. A small smirk played on her lips, and her brows wiggled. I'm sure your pack is eagerly awaiting their new leader.

I chuckled. Let them wait. I'm not done with you yet.

Her squealed laughter as I hauled her body on top of mine mended my soul. Hearing that joyful sound made all the pain I'd experienced throughout my life—the

devastation and the loneliness—worth it. I'd do it all again to find her.

The woman who taught me to live again. For her, I would.

EPILOGUE

ARIA

A warm evening breeze swept a lock of hair away behind my shoulder, exposing the pale skin at my breast and the babe who suckled greedily.

Her eyes had fluttered shut long ago, though her cheeks still worked as she nursed into a deep sleep. Every few minutes, she released a soft mewl of satisfaction and squeezed at my fleshy skin, and my heart swelled with unbridled devotion. If I dwindled too long in this state of overwhelming emotion, tears would undoubtedly prickle my eyes and spill down my cheeks.

I thought by now I'd be accustomed to the act of giving birth to a piece of my heart. I'd done it thrice before, after all. But even now, as I cradled the fourth mirror-image of my mate, the deep-seated love threatened to undo me.

The door to the back porch creaked as it swung open, lifting my attention from the bundle of skin and blanket at my chest. I glanced over my shoulder and smiled at the male standing in the doorway, illuminated by the last rays of a dying summer sun.

With a grin that rivaled the beauty of a sunset, Malik leaned against the doorframe and crossed his arms. The fabric of his white shirt stretched tight across his chest, and I drank in the delicious sight.

The kids are finally asleep, Malik reported, his deep voice a caress that soothed my soul. James and Elias fought it, but Penelope helped me read them a story. She's

becoming more and more like you every day.

I laughed, gently adjusting little Sophie's position on my chest. Her latch fell away from my nipple, but the three month old didn't stir. That's kind of you to say, considering every one of our pups could be your mirror image.

It was true. Malik's genes overpowered mine in almost every department. Each of our children possessed warm brown hair, beautifully strong features, and the loveliest shade of cloud-gray eyes. I wouldn't change them for the world.

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Say the word and I'll be more than happy to try again. We're bound to get blonde hair and blue eyes eventually. A sly smirk tugged on Malik's lips as he stepped onto the back porch of the house we moved into shortly after the birth of our twin boys.

It broke my heart to leave the cottage of our beginning, but the arrival of two rambunctious boys necessitated more space. Malik handpicked a piece of land far enough away from the pack house to offer us privacy, while also maintaining our connection to the pack he served and dedicated his life to.

Alpha.

Sometimes, it was easy to forget that my mate led the strongest pack in the northern territories.

Malik ruled the Intonat Noctewith a fairness and strength of character that his brother and father never possessed. As a result, in the six years since he became AlphaMalik, he'd led the pack into a period of unprecedented peace and prosperity. But when he came home in the evenings, he never brought the weight of his responsibilities home with him.

To me and our children, Malik remained a heartbreakingly gentle father, a doting mate, and the brightest light in our lives. We owed him everything.

"I happen to be partial to brown hair and gray eyes," I teased, readjusting my shirt, rising from the rocking chair, and approaching the doorway. "Besides, we haven't gone astray yet. We shouldn't mess with a good thing."

Malik's smile grew as he turned his attention to the bundle in my arms. You're right. And we seem to be getting better and better with practice. He took our daughter from my arms and nuzzled her rounded cheek with his nose, his eye sparkling with awe. Isn't that right, little Sophie?

I stretched, extending my arms to the darkening sky, and giggled. "Don't let Penelope hear you say that."

Oh, she knows I'm wrapped around her little finger. He winked. Just like her mama.

Standing on my toes, I pressed a quick kiss to his cheek, lips grazing the puffy scar-tissue without a second thought. Somewhere over the years, Malik's scars became the most beautiful part of him in my eyes. They represented all he'd endured and persevered through. Every reason that I loved him.

"How about I put this little one down, and then we can practice some more?" I shot him a feline smile, clutching his meaty forearm in anticipation for the promise of precious hours alone tonight.

Go inside and eat. I'll put her down, he offered, though sparks danced in his gaze at my proposition. Then, when I come back, I'll eat.

Blood rushed to my cheeks at the heavy insinuation. Even now, my heart fluttered at the thought of what would come, just like it did six years ago. Years from now, I knew it would do the same.

Malik and I could be old and gray, bent and broken, and he would still be the only one capable of making me blush. I'd still catch a glimpse of his naked body and feel the flush of desire in every corner of my bloodstream. I'd witness his smile and feel the breath sweep from my lungs. I'd hear his voice in my mind and rejoice at the sound.

My lover. My best friend.

My silent mate.