



Alpha's One-Night Stand (Shifters of Clarion #3)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: I have a one-night stand with a gorgeous playboy on my first night at Moonhelm Academy.

He says I'm his fated mate but I don't belong to anyone, especially not a wolf shifter.

I enrolled in this secret school for shifters to investigate my mother's disappearance.

That brooding playboy turns out to be the son of the school's wealthy benefactor.

His rock-hard body and piercing green eyes are irresistible,

But I can't let him distract me from finding clues about my mother.

Unperturbed by my rejection, he wants to claim me.

I'm captured by a foe hiding in plain sight,

But my protective alpha needs to keep his rage under control.

If he fails, the wolf inside him will kill us all.

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In my dreams, I'm always running, never thinking about where I'm headed or what is chasing me.

And every morning I wake up drenched in sweat and gasping for breath. Sometimes, my body aches like I've fallen from a thousand-story building.

Either way, I have always thought of it as a vision of my death.

I'll never forget the fear that clutches me tightly like hands around my neck. It looms like a shadow waiting for me to drop my guard, waiting for me to give in to the mind game it plays.

Then there's the lingering feeling of desperation that I have to get somewhere, and every night, just before I reach the white door at the edge of the woods, I plunge down into that forbidden depth. Everything after that is a blur.

So, tonight, like every other, as my consciousness slowly slips away, I know that it will either be this dream or the others that I can never make sense of or fully remember. I'm plagued by these nightmares.

You'd think that the excitement about tomorrow's flight would be enough to keep me up, but it's been a long day, and my exhausted body is giving way to the drowsiness. The second I drift off, the eerie coldness of the thick forest welcomes me.

This time, I am determined to see my pursuer. I linger, taking deep breaths to calm my pounding heart. I can feel the pressure of its arrival coming closer and closer with each second I stand here.

My feet, however, are stubbornly rooted to the ground. I shouldn't be standing here. I should move forward like I usually do in these dreams. I struggle, mentally begging for the slightest movement. They don't budge, however. It's like I'm stuck in cement.

The rustling of the bushes around me has stopped, and it's pitch dark. My wide, wild eyes dart around in the silence, waiting for the night to claim me.

And then, soft as a hum, it floats up to my ears. A whisper through the trees, then a low and rumbling growl. As I stand there, paralyzed, the growling swirls around me, moving in slow circles as it approaches.

It's coming for me. My breath catches in my throat as I start to shiver with fear. I shouldn't have waited. I should have run. At least if I had, I would be out of this nightmare by now.

I close my eyes tight. There's no light here, but I still close them, feeling secure in my own darkness rather than the shadows that surround me. I count backward. It's always worked before—it has to work now. Please, I whisper underneath the short gasps of breaths I take between numbers.

A breath on the back of my neck. My hair stands on end, and all the numbers fall away from me. A voice, low and rumbling as its growls, speaks into my ear.

“Yarra . . .”

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!

The buzzing from my nightstand jolts me to consciousness. I sit up, wildly looking around, as sweat drips down my forehead and my hands tremble. The nightmare is still vivid in my mind, and the hard screeching buzz of my alarm isn't making anything better. That feeling of dread still hangs in the air around me.

I glance over at my alarm. It's six in the morning. Shit. I hit the snooze button to stop its incessant buzzing. How long has my clock been going off? God, I was supposed to be up at four. I should be at the airport right now. I throw off the covers and hurry to my closet, frantically searching for the outfit I picked out the night before.

Today is a big day. It's my first day at Moonhelm Academy, and if there is anything I care about more than my Nana, it's making a good first impression. Nana always said that your appearance is everything, and her sentiments have rubbed off on me.

I find the outfit and lay it on my bed, then race to the bathroom and wash my face with cold water and run a brush through my violet colored hair. Glancing in the mirror, I look okay. My skin is a little sallow, and my sharp blue eyes are rimmed with red. It's too bad I can't take the time to put on makeup or anything. I've only got a flimsy hour and a half to get to the airport. I've got to get moving. I can't be late on my first day!

I don't have enough time for a shower, so I take a few minutes to wipe myself down with a washcloth and soap. As the towel scrubs my skin, I think about how this is going to put me one step closer to finding out more about my mother. The thought of her always comes with a wave of sadness. My heart clenches for a second before I push her memory away.

I get dressed and mentally review my packing list, making sure I didn't forget anything crucial. I'm pretty sure I have everything. God, I wish I could put on makeup. Should I? No, no. I need to get moving. I can't miss this flight!

As I bolt down the stairs, I'm met with the piercing whistle of a kettle echoing from the kitchen. Nana's morning tea, of course. I'm glad she's up to see me off. I rush into the kitchen, where Nana is standing by the stove, pouring the water from the kettle into her cup of tea.

“Good morning, Nana!” I say, rushing up and kissing her on the cheek. Nana gives me a once over with a sweep of her eyes. Her gaze lingers on my suitcase, and she sighs.

“So. You’re still going.”

I look away. Nana warned me against going to Moonhelm, especially since she knows that it’s really just a quest to find my mother. We’ve talked and talked about it, but in the end, she knows that I have to do this.

Doesn’t mean she’s happy about it. I force a smile and say, “Yes, ma’am.”

“Hmph,” she grunts as she takes her cup of tea over to the table. She reaches over to the sugar bowl and drops two cubes into the steaming liquid.

“Nana,” I say to her, sitting down at the table, “I know how you feel about my trip, but I still feel like it’s something I need to do. I have to do it. It’s important to me. You can understand that, right?”

She doesn’t say anything for a long moment. I know she’s against this, though I’m not entirely sure why. Maybe she’s worried I’ll find out something I’m not supposed to know.

She sets the spoon down on the plate under her teacup and sighs. “Well,” she says, “I guess since you got that invitation in the first place. I understand they’re very choosy with their applicants. They must see something special in you. Maybe it’s a sign you’ll find something more than what you’re going there for.”

Her eyes soften as she touches my cheek with one hand. “Just promise me that you’ll be safe. You’re all I have left in this world, you know.”

My heart ached. Nana and I . . . We're the only family we have since Mom disappeared years ago. I get it now, I guess. I touch her hand, pressing it to my cheek.

"I will," I tell her. "I promise."

She smiles at me and nods. I lean over and wrap my arms around her neck, taking in her scent of fresh lemons, memorizing it. "I'll stay in touch, Nana. I'll call as often as I can."

"You'd better," she says with a laugh. "Do whatever you feel is best, but if you get in trouble . . . if things start to happen that you can't explain, come home. Drop everything and come back here as fast as you can. Do you understand me?"

I nod, and my stomach tightens a little. What is she so worried about? It's just a school. I didn't think she believed all those rumors surrounding Moonhelm. I've never believed in any of it, but there are a lot of people that think Moonhelm is some kind of haunted boarding school or something. Never pegged Nana as the superstitious type.

I smile at her and say, "I'll be fine. And if anything bizarre happens, I'll come straight home. Promise."

She nods shortly, her withering eyes sparkling just a little as she gazes on my face. "Good. Now, go on. You're going to be late."

"Yes, ma'am."

I kiss her cheek, and then I leave the kitchen, making my way to the cab stop down the road from our house.

As I walk, my phone buzzes in my pocket. There's a cab sitting right there waiting

for me. I wave to get the driver's attention, and he gets out of the car to help me with my suitcase. I wait until he closes the trunk before I answer the call.

"Hello, Yarra? It's Cole."

Ah, Cole. The paranormal investigator I contacted at Silver Crest. He'd agreed to help me with some research into my mother's disappearance. Interesting. I wasn't really expecting his call this soon.

"Hi," I say as I get into the back seat of the cab. "I was just on my way to the airport."

"Good, good. I just wanted to confirm your flight. You're landing around nine, right?"

"That's right. Thank you, again, for reaching out to me about my mother. The police are calling it a cold case now since it's been so long. Your help . . . well, it's a godsend."

"Don't thank me yet," he said. "We've still got work to do. I'll see you when you land."

"That you will. And thanks again."

I hang up as the cab pulls off toward the airport. My mind drifts back to the last time I saw my mother.

We had gone on a walk in the park. The day was chilly like it is now, but the sun was out, so it wasn't that bad. We walked along the path leading around the playground and into the small patch of woods separating the populated area from the road. I still smell the sweet, minty scent of the pine trees all around us.

I love the woods here. And the playground. And everything. I've never been the type of person who was eager to leave her small town. I was content here. Especially with my mother's hand in mine as we walked along the trail.

That day, she seemed a little on edge, glancing over her shoulder every few minutes as we walked. I finally asked her if she was okay. She just smiled at me and said she was fine. We'd been talking about my time in community college. I had just started my first year at that point, so I was eager to tell her all about my teachers. She didn't seem to be listening, though. Something was distracting her.

Finally, she stopped on the path and gave a quick look around me. She took me by the shoulders and said only one word. "Moonhelm."

"What?" I answered with a nervous laugh.

"Just remember it for me. Please? Moonhelm."

I nodded. I had no idea what Moonhelm was or what it meant then. Not long after that, she disappeared, and all I had left were memories of her. When I learned that Moonhelm was a school . . .

Yeah. I believe it was a clue. Somehow, she knew what was going to happen to her, and she was giving me a clue for how to find her. I wish I'd realized that sooner. I hope I can still find her now that it's been about ten years since she disappeared.

The ride doesn't last that long. I'm at the airport in under an hour. The cab driver helps me with my bags, and I'm off. I check in, get my boarding pass, and make my way through security. The airport is crowded with people hurrying to catch their flights. I'm keeping calm, though, taking deep breaths. I'm going to make this flight. I got here just in time. They haven't even started boarding yet.

I sit down at my gate and wait. My plane is still about thirty minutes from boarding. I look down at my phone and start checking my emails.

“Excuse me?” I look up to see a man in a gray suit standing next to me. “Is the seat taken?”

I shake my head, and he smiles at me before sitting. A sharp scent wafts over me the second he sits. It’s an odd scent. Not exactly cologne . . . or maybe it is? I’ve never smelled anything like it.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we would like to invite passengers on board flight 7 to Silver Crest. Your attention please . . .”

All right. We’re boarding. I stand up, glad to put some distance between the odorous man in the gray suit. I happen to glance over my shoulder at him, and he gives me a curt smile, his dark eyes boring through me. I turn around quickly. This dude is giving me the creeps.

Is this one of those strange things that Nana warned me about? No, just another creepy guy staring at my ass in public. A creepy guy with weird cologne.

As I board the plane, I pray he doesn’t decide to sit next to me. That’s the last thing I need. I should have brought my headphones with me.

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U gh. I can't believe I'm doing this. Here I am on a flying tin can, surrounded by humans. I feel like a caged animal.

“Good morning, Mr. Robertson. Can I get you anything for the trip?” Out of nowhere, a flight attendant appears and starts talking to me. It takes me a second to process what she's saying. I wonder if my mother told these people I was going to be on the plane today. I swear, she's always going overboard.

“Uh, no,” I reply, clearing my throat.

“Are you sure, sir?” she asks, smiling down at me almost mechanically. She's wearing a uniform like all the other attendants, a blue form-fitting dress over a slender figure. Her tag, which reads Sophie , is almost entirely obscured by her long dark hair. I don't know how my mother did it, but this is definitely a setup. I can sense it. She's beautiful, this woman. The dress fits her like a glove, clinging to her shape like it's made from cellophane. She's not exactly my type, but she definitely fits the profile of a woman I might bring home . . . and Mother's been obsessing over finding my mate since I turned twenty-five.

You'd think that she, of all people, would understand that it never works that way. Never mind the fact that I'm not ready for a relationship.

“I'm good, Sophie,” I tell her, returning her fake smile. “Thank you.”

“Just let me know if you need anything.” She winks at me before sashaying down the aisle. Honestly, I don't know what Mother thought was going to happen here.

This whole trip, in fact, is at Mother's insistence. She wants me to attend Moonhelm's Awakening Fest, so I'm here, begrudgingly flying in first class and avoiding the lustful gaze of some oversexed plane waitress. The upside of going to Moonhelm was that I'd at least get to see Mother after all this time. Being that she dedicated her life and career to teaching there, it's really the only way I get to see her in person these days.

Personally, I feel like the whole thing is a pointless tradition, the Awakening affair. Mother was adamant that I participate, though.

It doesn't take long before the flight attendants start in on their safety demonstration. The plane begins to taxi out onto the runway, so I shut my eyes to tune it all out. The sooner this whole thing is over, the happier I'll be.

I drift off into my own thoughts as the plane takes off. It's all so frustrating.

The pressures of being an Alpha wolf these days are infuriating. As I understand it, throughout history, packs have always had young Alphas trying to figure their shit out before being "made," as I like to put it. Learning the history of Alphas in Clarion has taught me that, at the very least, I'm not alone in my struggles. At least I'm not an Alpha King. The Moon Goddess gives them not just one form to deal with, but three . I have enough trouble keeping my wolf in check most days. I can't imagine trying to reign in a bear and a lion on top of that.

Still, it's embarrassing not knowing how to control the raging urges that come with being an Alpha to my pack. I wish I had a better handle on it. Mother keeps telling me it comes with time, but . . . Well, living in the world outside of Clarion, where no one knows anything about my people, makes it even tougher to manage.

I do what I can. Meditation. Special herbs Mother sends me. When I was younger, I even tried human drugs. Nothing has helped entirely. In fact, I had an outburst a

couple of days ago. Even now, I don't even really remember what triggered it. All I remember is waking up from a fugue state, ready to rip two policemen's throats out. The thought of it sends angry shudders through my body.

Stand down, I think to my wolf as he stirs inside me. I take deep breaths. Stand down.

It's getting worse, this loss of control. I hate to admit that. I'm going to have to talk to Mother about it. There has to be something that can be done about my self-control.

I don't want to think about what might happen if I changed right now, with no way to escape. Stand down, dammit.

I hear someone gasp, and a sudden jolt shakes me out of my thoughts.

"What's happening?" The woman sitting next to me clutches at the seat in front of her, knuckles pale and eyes wide. The plane has begun to sway uncontrollably.

I can sense her fear and discomfort, and it's annoying me. I never fancied dealing with the problems of humans. One tiny anomaly and they just go all to pieces. I don't know how they've managed to survive the world for so many generations. The light to fasten our seatbelts flashes on, and the captain's voice chimes in over the intercom. "Ladies and gentlemen. We've hit a little turbulence. Please remain seated while the fasten seatbelt light is on. We should be clearing it any time now."

I sigh and close my eyes. The troubles of my wolf are threatening to come to the surface. I can feel it pacing like the caged beast that he is. Stand down...stand down, dammit...

I'm so focused that I don't notice Sophie touching my shoulder. "Mr. Robertson? Mr. Robertson, are you—"

My wolf leaps out, forcing me to look up at her. She cringes as she pulls away, her eyes filled with terror. She looks one way, then the other, and kneels down to my seat.

“Keep your eyes closed, sir,” she whispers. Hearing her voice makes me grab hold of my wolf. When we change, our eyes glow gold. The last thing I need is for someone to see that.

I shut my eyes and keep focusing as the plane levels off. The rumbling around us ceases. I hold on until I can feel the passing of the clouds whittle away.

I sink back into my seat, as my racing heart starts to calm. Sophie walks by with the drink cart, and she smiles at me and squeezes my shoulder knowingly. Plant or not, I have to thank her for stepping in.

I lean my head back in my seat and take some more deep breaths. My wolf is pulling away. Thank goodness.

There’s that scent again . . .

I catch it floating around my head, and I open my eyes. I smelled it first in the airport, tracking it to a beautiful woman with shoulder-length electric purple hair sitting by herself. I’ve never smelled anything like that before. Surely, it’s the same woman. It’s strong, though. Much stronger than when I picked it up before.

My wolf is back up again, pacing inside me and threatening to come to the surface. I squeeze my eyes tight and force it down, trying to stop the primal rush going through me, pulsating in my veins.

Stand. The Fuck. Down. I grit my teeth, struggling hard as the wolf fights me to come out.

No, no, this is not the time to be going full-on wolf mode. I grip the seats and push hard, my breath coming in a gasping, shuddery rhythm.

Stand down, dammit . . . please . . . not here . . .

It takes a long few seconds before my wolf finally concedes. Once it dies down, I open my eyes to see the woman sitting next to me looking back, her eyes filled with worry.

“Are you all right?”

I nod. I touch my forehead, and it’s covered in sweat. Shit, that was close.

Whoever the woman is, I can still smell her. I don’t know who she is or why she’s on this plane, but I need to find her again. Maybe this trip isn’t going to be so boring after all.

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As I stand up out of my seat, my legs wobble beneath me. My heart's racing and my hands are trembling.

"Come on, keep it together," I whisper to myself. I can't help but feel like my Nana's words are haunting this entire trip. First, that encounter with the strange man in the suit, then the flight rocking and rolling like crazy. This whole thing is feeling cursed.

I take a deep breath and try to compose myself as I make my way down the aisle. I look at one of the flight attendants, but she can't be bothered to meet my eyes. I try to offer a smile as I pass, but she doesn't even really acknowledge me. Damn, what a bitch!

As I reach the exit, a blast of cool air hits me and wakes me up. My senses came alive. I inhale deeply in an attempt to calm my nerves. The sound of the plane's engines has been replaced by the chatter of other passengers, and a sense of relief washes over me. I made it. Finally. The worst part is over.

I make my way down the jetway and into the terminal. My legs are still jittery, but I keep putting one foot in front of the other. I feel like the eyes of other travelers are on me, and it makes me wonder if they can tell how scared I was during the flight.

I'm definitely in my own head about this trip. All I kept thinking as the plane shook was that Nana was right, and I should have stayed home. What kind of horrible luck would it have been for the plane to crash. Like Nana had predicted my demise.

But she didn't. The plane landed, and I'm still here. Everything's fine. As soon as I reach the baggage claim, I see my suitcase rolling down the conveyor belt. Ha. My

luck is changing already. I grab it, grateful that at least something went smoothly during this journey.

I make my way out of the airport, relieved to be back on solid ground and eager to shake off this terrible feeling that Nana put on me. I keep saying to myself that I made the right decision to do this. She'd see it in the end. I just know it.

As I walk out, I pull my phone out of my bag and turn off airplane mode. Cole's messages light up the screen.

Sorry. Can't come pick you up. I found an interesting piece of info.

My heart skips a beat. Sure, it kind of sucks that he can't come get me, but information is the whole reason I'm here. Finally, things are looking up. I make my way out of the airport with my head still buried in my phone. Another message pops up.

Meet me at the Beans coffee shop on Nort Street in 15 mins.

Where the hell is Nort Street? I swipe the message away and open my maps app to search for it. Thank goodness it's not that far away. And it's only a five-minute drive to Moonhelm. I can meet up with the investigator and still be on time for the opening ceremony.

I type out a response confirming that I'll be there, my fingers trembling slightly with anticipation. For once, I feel like I'm a step closer to knowing more about my mother. A wisp of a gentle breeze brushes past my face, and with a new spring to my step, I flag down a cab. On my way to the coffee shop!

The ride was quick. I barely even had time to check in with Nana and tell her that I landed safely. When we arrive, the driver helps me with my bag, and I start walking

down the bustling city street, a mix of excitement and nervousness swirling in my gut. Here I am, on my way to meet the investigator who's been helping me, and I can't stop wondering what new information he might have for me.

Silver Crest is a beautiful city, the type that holds old secrets in its streets and libraries. As I walk down the cobbled streets, past dark alleys and winding paths leading behind old buildings, I imagine my mother walking down this same street. I can see her wanting to explore everything. I can easily picture her getting lost in the alleyways and markets that wind the city like a maze.

Something shifts behind me, and I look over my shoulder. A group of girls brush past me, and one of them looks back, her head tilted slightly. I guess I look pretty odd, dragging my suitcase along behind me on a city street. I keep walking, though. The coffee shop is just ahead.

It's a pretty typical café. Little tables scattered around and several booths against the wall. A single barista works behind the counter with a sort of forlorn look on her face. Another day in paradise , it seems to read.

The barista sees me but says nothing as I walk past her and toward the lone figure sitting in the booth in the far corner. He's got fiery red hair that falls into his eyes, but it's not messy. In fact, it's fairly well kept. He also has a beard, even though he looks to be somewhere around my age. Maybe a few years older. He's surprisingly handsome, actually. Not what I was picturing at all. He's looking down at a notebook, and I imagine he doesn't even see me yet. That must be him. Here we go . . .

“Cole?”

He looks up at me, his eyes flitting to my hair. In the dim light of this place, I'm sure the purple really stands out. “Yarra.”

“Yes. Hi.” My smile widens. I’m just relieved it’s the right guy.

“Please, sit down.” He gestures to the other side of the booth and smiles. It lights up his face with a certain charm. I imagine Cole has a way with the ladies. I sit down and take note of all the papers and notebooks on the table. He makes an attempt to clear them out of my way as I sit.

“So,” I start, “you said you discovered something?”

“Yes.” He puts on reading glasses. They sit on the edge of his nose like a librarian. “The day your mother went missing, another person was reported missing as well.”

Cole slides over a grainy black-and-white picture of a middle-aged man. I look at it for a moment, then say, “Who reported him missing?”

“Unclear. Some sources say a neighbor, but it was likely someone in the area. That part of isn’t really important, though. But get this. Jake Flannel also studied at Moonhelm Academy.”

That got my attention.

“Really?”

He nods. “Yeah, I’m thinking there’s some kind of connection to their disappearances somehow, but I’m still carrying out my research. I figured you might want to know where I’m at, though, since you’re on your way there. If there are more missing alumni from Moonhelm, well, that’s a pattern that might lead us somewhere.”

“I see. Do you think Moonhelm is responsible for the disappearances?”

He shrugs. “Honestly, I’ve got nothing more than that so far, but I got to thinking that

if there are more missing people from Moonhelm, I'm sure the academy would have those records. Not that they'd give them up easy."

"Why wouldn't they? I mean, isn't that sort of thing public record or something? They're just former students."

Cole leans in toward me, his eyes darkening. "Trust me, a lot of shady business goes on in Moonhelm, and the bastards who run the place know every single thing about whoever enters their school . . . or leaves it."

I shiver at his words. I'll bet there's a story there. Something personal.

"The point is," he adds, "you have access to the school now. Maybe you can find something in their records."

Cole adjusts his glasses with a finger. "I think the first step to finding your mother is getting inside Moonhelm. You're already there, so that's where we need to begin. I realize how scary this must be, but we will find your mother. I just know it."

The thought of it ignites hope in my chest. It's like confirmation that I'm on the right path.

"We'll talk whenever we can," he says, gathering up his notes and putting them away in a bag next to him. "I'll give you my number. Don't worry. It's untraceable, so no one will know you're investigating your mother's disappearance. Not by me, anyway." He takes off his glasses and puts them back in his pocket. "Remember, the people at Moonhelm are very smart. You give them something to worry about, and they'll sniff you out in a heartbeat. Be very careful in how you move."

My heart skips a beat with excitement. I feel like an undercover agent heading into no-man's-land.

“I get it.”

Cole nods. “Good luck, then. I’ll be in touch.”

I stand up, feeling like a superhero. Finally, I was moving forward. “Thank you so much, Cole, for doing this.”

He cracks a smile, and all that charm comes back again. “No problem. I’ve got your back, Yarra. We’re well on our way to finding your mother. Don’t worry.”

I walk out of the coffee shop. Next stop, Moonhelm Academy. I flag down another cab, and as I stow my suitcase in the trunk, the hair at the back of my neck stands on end. I look sharply over my shoulder. Nobody’s paying me any mind. People just walk by on their way to wherever. Nothing’s out of place. I get into the cab, ignoring the strange feeling that someone’s following me.

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“Excuse me, Mr. Robertson? I’m here to pick you up.”

I look up to see a man in a black suit and a hat over what is clearly a balding head speaking to me as I pass him by. I look around for a moment to confirm that he is actually speaking with me. He is.

“I’m sorry,” I say to him. “Do I know you?”

“No, sir.” He’s got a crisp British accent and an emotionless face. There is nothing in his features that I would characterize as memorable. Just a standard man in a black suit.

“My name is Cid,” he goes on. “I’m your mother’s driver. She sent me to collect you from the airport.”

Great. “And why isn’t she here?”

“She’s preparing for the ceremony, sir. May I?” He leans toward my bag, and I flinch away from him.

“There will be no need for that,” I reply. He may be my mother’s driver, but he’s a stranger to me still. I’m not about to let him take my bags. “Lead the way.”

He nods in a short and succinct way, then leads me outside to a black SUV on the curb. He unlocks the back with a press of the button on his key fob, then lifts it up so I can put my bag away. I throw my luggage in, then settle into the backseat.

As we drive through town, I can't help but feel a sense of nostalgia wash over me. Back in my school days, I walked through these streets between classes and on vacations when I wasn't invited back home. Although those were dark years, I had some good times, too. Thinking about them makes me smile a little. Having lunch at the coffee shop on Nort Street, taking a girl out on a date at the movie theatre on Tremble, sneaking backstage at a concert at the Butterfly Theatre.

The familiar streets and buildings are bringing back so many memories. I have to set them aside for the moment, however. This trip has been a rather strange one so far. I can't stop thinking about that woman's scent. Sweet, floral . . . and something else. Something I can't put my finger on. I've been seriously considering tracking it, even though it disappeared in the wind as soon as I walked out of the airport. I'm an Alpha wolf, though. I can track anything I put my mind to.

The curious thing about that scent was the way my body reacted almost immediately. When I sat down next to her, my wolf stirred, eager to be let out. I maintained my composure until I got on the plane, but the second I caught wind of it again, my body reacted even more strongly. I felt like I was on fire with arousal and excitement. It couldn't have been more than a few minutes, but all I wanted to do find the scent and . . . and . . .

I hadn't thought about what might come after that. The feeling was a mix of wanting to tear something apart and wanting to fuck until I dropped. I don't think I've ever felt quite that way before in my life. In some small way, I long for that scent. To feel like that in a safe space, to be able to release my wolf with abandon on the wings of it. I simply can't imagine the passion that it might elicit in me.

I've been told by Mother and by certain elders that a mate can have that effect on you. Sometimes you get excited just by being near them. Certain times of the moon's cycle cause those tensions to rise, and you lose control in the best ways. These are all stories from the last generation, though. Usually linked with antiquated rituals about

the Moon Goddess and the like.

It's all a nice fairy tale to think about. Mates destined to be together. Finding each other and staying together for life. It's all bullshit, though. Mother's separation from my father is proof of that. As far as I'm concerned, there's just no such thing as a fated mate.

The car slows down as we approach the high wrought-iron gates of Moonhelm coming up. It looks exactly the same. After all these years, no one's thought to change out those stupid rusty gates.

"Your private quarters have been arranged," Cid says as the gate slides open to allow us entry. "Your mother has asked, however, that you stay the night in her quarters tonight."

I frown at him through the rearview mirror. "Why?"

"I don't know, sir. I'm only delivering her message."

He doesn't say anything more to that, and we continue driving up the cobblestone path toward the school. Mother could be so insistent about things, but she rarely does anything without reason. My wolf awakens again, suddenly enraged. It's hot in here. I can't breathe . . .

"Stop the car."

Cid pauses, looking back at me through the rearview mirror. "Pardon me?"

"Let me out." The car stops and I get out, stumbling onto the cobblestone pavement. I loosen my tie and let the air into my lungs, closing my eyes and leaning against the car. "Stand down," I whisper to my wolf. "For fuck's sake . . . stand down. "

Cid has gotten out of the car and is now watching me carefully. I turn away from him, my wolf starting to calm as I push it back. Shit, it seems to be getting worse.

But then, I don't know what I was expecting. I'm exhausted from traveling, and the less sleep I get the harder it is to control my wolf. I hope this ceremony isn't a long one. I'm just not in the right head space for such a thing. All I need is help, and I need it as soon as possible. I don't know why I even have to be here otherwise.

As my wolf relaxes, I take a second and look down the road at the building looming over us. Dark stone bricks stack up into three towers, and the heavy wooden front doors take up about half the height of the building itself. Gargoyles, stone statues, pomp and circumstance. I'm amazed at how little has changed. It still looks like a dark harbinger stealing away the sunlight.

"Sir? Are you well?" Cid asks, his head tilted toward me. I nod and straighten my suit jacket. Better get this whole thing over with.

"I'm fine."

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“This is my stop, miss,” the driver announces.

“What? Won’t you take me in or something?”

He gives me a look as if I had just suggested something crazy.

“Sorry, miss. All public transports have to stop outside the gates of Moonhelm.”

I roll down the window and lean out, looking up at the high wrought-iron gates. About half a mile past it is a huge dark brick building that looks more like that big black mountain with the demon on it from Fantasia . This is the school?

It’s a weird policy, but . . . Well, this is kind of a weird set up in the first place. I pay the driver and get out. He gets my bag for me, then drives off without so much as a good luck.

Fabulous. For a moment, I stand there, alone, with my suitcase, left to face the mighty iron gates and the big scary building. I drag my belongings up to the gate and look around. There’s no call box or anything. There’s not even anyone out here. What am I supposed to do? Knock? Scream hello?

“Hello?” I holler, opting for the obvious. My voice echoes through the air, up into the sky, bouncing off the black walls of the building beyond. How the hell am I supposed to enter the damn school if there’s no way of getting into it? I start looking around for a rock to throw.

I hear a quick whooshing noise. I look up to see that a door has appeared in one of the

gate's columns. A tall man in a black guard's uniform stands in the door, looking at me with hard black eyes.

"State your name and purpose, please."

I'm speechless. Where did that door come from? Where did he come from?

"State your name and purpose," he repeats in more of a firm tone. I clear my throat.

"Um, I'm a student," I stammer. "I just got in and—"

"ID."

I fish around through my pockets and produce my driver's license. He takes it, looks it over quickly, then hands it back to me.

"Thank you, Ms. Wilkins. Walk down the road to the front entrance, then greet your host at the staircase." The gates slide open slowly. I look at them long enough to acknowledge their existence. When I turn back to the guard, he's gone.

I walk up the long cobblestone path to the front entrance. The building is so big, it feels like I'm not making any progress, like it's just standing still in the distance.

I am, though. Dragging my suitcase behind me as it makes an annoying clickety-clack sound over the stones, I get to the front entrance in a matter of minutes. I don't know what I was expecting, but I thought that maybe there might be a party of some sort. I see students here and there on the grounds, dressed in black uniforms with books in their arms. Talking and laughing with one another. It almost feels like any old a college campus.

But no party. No welcoming committee. Just me, walking past with my bag, trying

not to stare at the students around me.

The door has a large knocker on it. A wolf's head with a ring in its mouth. I reach up to use it, but the door opens on its own. Convenient.

I walk into the foyer, which looks less like some grand castle and more like a . . . well, school lobby. I pass through a sliding glass door where a woman waits by a front desk area, right before a flight of stairs. She smiles at me, her ruby red lipstick a little too loud for her pale skin.

"Welcome to Moonhelm," she says. "Please check in here." She motions to a clipboard on the desk. I walk over and sign my name. As I check in, I can't help but notice how normal everything seems here. It's quite the contrast from the gothic aesthetic of the exterior.

"Here you go," she says, handing me a keycard. "I hope you settle in nicely."

I smile politely, looking for a nametag. There isn't one. "Thank you," I say.

"The dormitories are right upstairs and down the hall. Just follow the signs. You're assigned to room twelve."

I thank her again and make my way up the stairs and down the hall as she instructed. The hall leading to the dormitories is short. Before I know it, I'm walking down what looks like a simple college dorm. I pass doors that have been decorated in some interesting ways. Photos, glitter—or at least it kind of looks like glitter. Sparks seem to jump off the wood. Better not touch it. The last thing I want is to get any on me.

Finally, I reach my plain brown door. I don't know if I'll decorate mine. Seems kind of silly since I'm not really here to study. I let myself in with my keycard. "Welcome to your new life," I whisper to myself.

I finally finish putting my clothes in the closet and unpacking all my toiletries. Looking around this room, it's like nothing really changed from before I moved in. It's a simple room. A full size bed in the corner, a desk in the other. Plain off-white walls and a beige carpet. I should make more of an effort to fit in and put up some posters or something in here. Later, though.

I pull out my cell phone and text Cole, Just made it in. I'll keep you updated. Then I set my cell phone down on my bed and go take a shower, since I didn't have time to when I left home.

Standing under the warm water, I start thinking about what Cole said about missing alumni and the connection to Mom's disappearance. I'll have to figure out where the records are being kept here. Surely there will be a tour or something that will tell me where everything is.

I dress quickly, putting on a black leather skirt and blouse. Hope I get a uniform soon. I don't have that many black clothes. I pick up my phone to check my messages. No word about an orientation or anything. Hmm. Strange, strange. I should find out where the administration office is and start there.

I leave my dorm room and walk down the hallway. As I do, I notice several students milling about, just like I'd seen them outside. As I pass by some of the groups, they stare at me. Whispers as I pass by. I catch a phrase that seems directed at me, though nobody stops me.

Blue blood . That must mean me? Maybe that's what they call new students here. I keep walking, though.

I go down the stairs and spot the woman I met coming in. She's still standing by the front desk like she's got nothing better to do. I walk up to her.

“Excuse me. Do you know where the administration building is?”

The woman tilts her head a little, then answers, “Why yes. You can find the administration building on the eastern side of campus. Just follow the path. The signs will tell you where to go.”

It’s hitting me that there’s something a little . . . mechanical about the way she’s talking to me. She almost sounds like an Alexa.

“Thanks,” I say to her and walk out the front door.

Outside, students casually stroll the grounds. I start to wonder about classes and how they were structured. What buildings they were in and what my schedule was going to be. It’s so weird that nobody’s given me a packet or something yet.

I walk along the path, heading east as instructed. A calm breeze brushes against my face. It’s a nice, sunny day, and it feels good to be outside for a minute. I kind of feel like I’m on a leisurely walk.

I start taking note of the building structures. Looking at the places that I imagine are the academic portions of campus. I pass by one large window and see rows of bookshelves, students studying at tables. Ah, the library. Making a mental note of that . . .

Tall trees silently whisper above me. If I didn’t know better, I’d think that they were trying to talk to me. I chuckle to myself, the thought of a mouth actually appearing on one of the tree trunks tickling me.

I must be turned around. I’m suddenly standing in a patch of wood. I look behind me and see nothing but trees. Shit. I got distracted and walked off the path somehow. I look around a little more and spot a tiny chapel through the trees. It’s painted almost

entirely white with a bell sitting on the rooftop. And right beside it is a graveyard.

I walk toward it. When I clear the trees, I can see the headstones are all bone white and jutting out like piano keys. I walk over to the gate around the graveyard and peer in at them. They all look brand new. I wonder who the caretaker is here. There's not a single spec of dirt or moss on any of them.

I also notice that each stone is cut out in the same shape and size. Like a war memorial or something. Hmm. Was there a war here, perhaps? Curiouser and curiouser.

One of the rods in the gate is bent slightly. I decide to squeeze through it and onto the soft carpet of grass enveloping the graveyard. It's dead quiet here. There's no sound of the trees rustling or birds in the distance. I feel like I've stepped into a vacuum. As I walk, I start to look at each bright white headstone, the names catching my attention. I pause at one headstone.

Mother and esteemed founder, Kathryn Lingus. The word mother jumps out at me. Not my mother's name...but close. She could be here, buried among the dead. No one ever came to visit because no one ever knew . . .

I keep walking, reading the headstones, silently searching for Karen Wilkinson and hoping, yet dreading a glimpse of my mother's name on the stone.

Something pulls my attention away. A faint tinkling sound. I look up at the bell hanging over the door to the tiny chapel.

I don't know why, but the bell is pulling me in. I start walking toward it, finding my way out of the graveyard and walking around to the front door. I stop at the foot of the stairs.

A white door, slightly ajar, beckons me. The wood has been whitewashed over, but it's old and splintery. I've seen this door before!

A cold feeling goes through me as I realize where I've seen it. Running through the dark forest in a cold place with no sound, something chasing me. And at the end, I find a door. This door. Always this door. Slightly open, waiting for me to enter.

Cold sweat drips down my back as I stand here frozen. This isn't real. I'm in a trance. Or I've tripped and fallen and now I'm asleep. My eyes start to sting with tears as I look over my shoulder, wondering if the thing chasing me was going to show up.

I will myself to step forward. Maybe whatever is in this chapel is my salvation. I need to find out what's beyond the door no matter what. I climb up the stairs and stop, terror holding me in front of the door. I can't hear anyone inside. Only the tinkling of the bell. Without thinking, I reach out to touch the door, placing my palm against the rough surface. A sudden jolt of electricity surges through my hand, shooting up my arm and coursing through my body. I gasp, trying to pull away, but my hand stays firmly in place, stuck to the door like glue.

My body shakes, and I cry out in pain, a ringing buzz rushing through me. Then a white hot POP , and I'm thrown backwards, sailing over the stairs and hitting the ground.

The trees above me blur as my body vibrates from the electrical shock. All I can hear is my shallow breathing . . . then darkness.

I'm running through the woods, my heart pounding in my chest. My ragged breaths echo in my ears as I dart between the trees, trying to put as much distance as possible between me and the thing that's chasing me.

I don't know what it is, but I can feel its hot breath on the back of my neck. Every

time I glance over my shoulder, I catch a glimpse of something dark and twisted, its eyes glowing with an otherworldly light.

I've been here before, in this nightmare. It's always the same, but this time, it feels more real than ever before. The trees are taller, the shadows deeper, and the branches are reaching out to snag me as I run.

And then I see it. A twisted, gnarled tree that looks like it's been struck by lightning. It's like a signpost, telling me that I'm getting closer to . . . something.

My mother? My death? I don't know what's waiting for me, but I know that I have to keep moving forward even though every instinct in my body is telling me to turn back and face whatever is chasing me.

There is no escape. There's only the chase, the fear, and the endless woods stretching out before me.

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Cid stops the car in front of Moonhelm Academy's private guest quarters, and I'm relieved that I'm finally where I'm supposed to be—and in one piece.

As Cid opens my door and I get out, a young woman emerges from the building, her long dark ponytail swaying as she walks. She's wearing the school uniform . . . sort of. Her black blouse has two or three buttons undone, revealing her cleavage, and her black skirt is so short, I doubt she could bend down in it. She smiles and waves at me as if we're old friends.

"Chadwick Robertson?" Her walk changes into a light jog as she approaches, adjusting round glasses sitting on the edge of an upturned nose. She's got big doe eyes behind those glasses that make me wonder if they're really as big as saucers or if she's just got a thick prescription.

I'll tell you this much. She doesn't smell human. But then, humans hardly ever find themselves here. The scent I'm picking up is a familiar one. She's one of my own. A wolf, like me. Not from my pack, but definitely the same species.

"Depends on who's asking," I say as she walks up to the car.

She smiles at that, her cheeks blushing a little. "Your mother didn't mention your charms." She giggles and pushes her dark hair over one ear. Ah, okay. Another of my mother's traps.

"Sir," Cid says, "I must be returning. Your bags?" He'd already put my bags on the ground next to the car. Yeah, he's probably in on this ruse as well.

“Fine,” I say, waving him away. “Give Mother my regards.” I turn to the woman and ask, “So, who are you supposed to be?”

She does a flimsy curtsy and flips her long ponytail to one side. “I’m your welcome party.”

A joke, I guess. I nod and say, “Doesn’t look much of a party. Looks like you’re all by yourself.”

“Well, Mr. Robertson,” she says, her voice dripping honey, “I’m all the party you need.”

That makes me smile. Well, much like the flight attendant, this woman is pretty enough to spend some time with. At least, she seems willing enough for it. I guess after this long, strange trip, I could use a distraction for a few hours.

She playfully bit her lower lip. “Come. I’ll show you to your room.”

She walks away, her hips swinging from side to side like she knows I’m watching. Just like the flight attendant. I wonder if Mother taught these women how to attract me. Was there a class exclusively for women hoping to trap Chadwick Robertson into making them my Luna? I think I’d be more surprised if there wasn’t.

I follow her, enjoying the view as I climb the steps into the building behind her. Yeah. She’d make for a good way to while away the hours until Mother calls for me.

Right before I enter the building, the scent comes wafting up to me out of nowhere. I stop on the landing and turn around, my nostrils flaring in an effort to track its direction. The purple- haired woman. Here ? What would she be doing here? Was she following me somehow? I scan the horizon, looking for any flash of that electric purple shade that I saw in the airport.

There's nothing. Students walk around the campus in the distance. Some of them have different colored hair, and I pick up shades of blue and red. No purple. Or at least not the same shade as the mystery woman's hair.

"Mr. Robertson?"

I turn to see "The Welcoming Party" looking back at me with her head cocked to one side.

"Are you okay?" she asks.

I turn away, looking around myself again. The scent is faint, but it's there. She's close by. I can feel my wolf stirring, my heart starting to race. It's almost painful. The wolf inside me is pacing. I need to get inside and as far away from that scent as I can. Now.

I walk inside and close the door shut behind me. Her scent is still there, still taunting me. Welcoming Party is looking at me with concern now. "Yeah, where's my room?" I say to her. She nods her head and starts walking down the first hall, still strutting with a swing in her step. Funny how what turned me on a minute ago is starting to piss me off now.

"It's this one." She points to the door to the left of her. We walk to it together, and she hands me my keycard. I take it from her and open the door without a word.

"Mr. Robertson," she says as I step over the threshold, "I thought maybe you'd like a little company. I've got some time between classes."

"Thank you, but I'd prefer to be alone."

I start to close the door, and she puts her hand out to stop it. "Mr. Robertson, I was

told that you might enjoy some company for a few hours before the party. Was I mistaken?"

I'm thoroughly irritated now. I don't know if the scent is still around me now or if the memory of it is stuck inside my nose. All I do know is that if this woman doesn't leave, I might be forced to make her go.

"Yes," I tell her. "Thank you for showing me to my room, but I'm fine. Please leave."

Her big doe eyes tear up with hurt. Perhaps if my wolf wasn't clawing at my insides to be free right now, I'd be inclined to feel bad for hurting her feelings.

I don't, though. I need her to go. And I need her to go now. I don't let her say another word. I step back and close the door in her face.

"Stand down," I say out loud once I'm alone. "Stand the fuck down. " My wolf creeps into my voice now, an ancient growl mixing with my human tones. A sure signal that my wolf can burst out at any moment. I shut my eyes tight and start taking deep breaths. It starts to work. The wolf is backing down.

Fuck. This woman and her damnable scent are going to drive me insane.

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G ONG . . . GONG . . . GONG . . .

The loud sound of heavy bells ringing somewhere above me is the first thing I hear. It's so loud that it startles me into sitting straight up on the hard ground. I look around, trying to get my bearings. I'm back at the white door of the chapel, the darkness of the nightmare melting around me. I warily move away from the white door, getting to my feet as quickly as I can. My hand still tingles from where I touched the doorknob. It's like I've been electrocuted. What happened to me?

I need a drink. Or two.

I dust myself off and fish my cell phone from my pocket. I've been out for two whole hours? I look around and up the path that I came. Clearly, nobody's been through here. I would imagine they would have gotten help if they saw me lying here in that time.

I'm getting out of here. I start making my way back up the path and in the direction that I think the dorm is in. I've lost my bearings before in these woods. God, I hope it doesn't happen again.

Getting back to campus doesn't take long. In fact, the path I'm on leads directly to the east side of the school where I'd started walking in the first place. I glance around the woods, wondering how I even ended up near that chapel with such a short walk. As I walk, I realize that no one seems to notice me. Everything looks just as it did two hours ago with students milling about and going to classes or sitting around and talking while eating their lunches in a small picnic area. All very, very normal.

And yet, not normal. At least those woods aren't normal, anyway.

I enter the lobby of my dorm, and the odd woman is still standing there, smiling like it's her only job. I start to walk past her, heading to my room to rest my head. I get as far as the stairs when it occurs to me that a drink actually would be nice right about now. My hands are still tingling, and they're trembling a little. I could use something to chill me out before going to sleep.

I turn around to the woman and ask, "Excuse me?"

She looks at me directly, her shiny blue eyes like doll's glass. "May I help you?"

"Yes, please. Is there some place I can get a drink? Like a bar?"

"Why yes. There is a campus pub not far from here. Allow me to give you a map." She walks over to the desk next to her and goes through the drawers. A second later, she returns with a folded map in her hands. She hands it to me.

"The Moonlight," she says. "I know it's a corny name, but that's where you'll find whatever you're looking for."

I take the map and return her smile. "Thank you."

I have the thought of changing clothes. My leather skirt still has a little bit of dirt on it, but I think better of it. I'm sure the lighting in the bar will be so low that no one will notice, anyway.

Besides, now that I'm set on going, that drink is becoming less of a want and more of a need. That nightmare, the weird chapel, I can analyze it later. All I want right now is to forget for a few hours.

I turn around and walk out of the lobby, following the map down the path. Wow. It's already almost dark. Wasn't it afternoon a second ago?

Maybe after this drink I'll get myself checked out at the school infirmary. Loss of time isn't a great thing, and I'll need my wits about me for whatever's to come when I start my search for my mom.

I only take a few steps when I smell it. The scent of that strange man from the airport. It comes and goes like the breeze, making me feel like maybe I imagined it. I must have hit my head when I fell to be thinking about him right this second. Or at least about his cologne.

I keep walking, and before long I see the lights of the pub on the path. I look at the thick black door and the neon sign hanging over head flashing the word Moonlight at me, a neon cartoon of a wolf braying at the moon next to it.

Wow, that is pretty corny. It's giving eighties horror movie, in fact. I laugh to myself and walk through the door.

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I can't take it anymore. Somewhere in the night, her scent got stronger, permeating the walls of my room as if they were awash with it. I feel like I'm drowning in it. I can't take it anymore. I have to leave. I have to find her.

Nothing in this world ever gets me running unless I'm fighting or defending my territory. Yet, here I am, my heart pounding in my chest, my shoes crushing the damp grass, bounding across campus, and damn well praying that I don't lose the scent. My nose to the air, I'm closing in on it. I can feel it.

The sun is slowly hovering over the horizon, and the air around me is filled with the excitement of the Awakening Fest. I barely notice it. All that matters is that I find her.

I'm being led toward the campus bar. Moonlight, it's called. I get to the door and look up at the blinking sign. I don't sense too many other heartbeats beyond the door. I imagine everyone's getting ready for the ceremony. I enter the bar, and my suspicions prove correct. The bar is almost empty, save a few people, scattered around.

I scan the room, my senses heightened. It doesn't take long before I see a flash of electric purple out of the corner of my eye.

She's sitting on a bar stool, her back to me. Her waves of shiny purple hair pull me in along with that sweet smell. I've found her. Finally.

I walk toward her, and I can hear her heart beating. It's speeding up, syncing with mine. I clench my fists, pushing the wolf back down inside me. I'm a few steps away when she turns suddenly, making me take a step back. Her crystal blue eyes meet

mine, and all the air leaves the room. A bit of her amethyst locks move effortlessly around her face, framing it as she puckers her lips slightly.

We stare at each other for a long moment before she slurs, “Who are you?” Her voice buzzes in my chest, striking the wolf within.

“I’m Chad,” I reply, trying to keep my tone steady despite the surge of emotion pulsing through me.

She raises an eyebrow. “Chad,” she repeats slowly, as if testing the name on her tongue. “Are you following me, Chad?”

I blink. “Following you?”

“The airport. You sat next to me, remember?”

I smile and take a seat next to her. “How could I forget? Your scent enraptured me the moment I picked it up.”

She frowns and cocks her head like she doesn’t understand. Then she laughs. “You Moonhelm dudes are weird AF.”

She’s messing with me. Interesting. I’ve had at least two women throw themselves at me since I started this trip, and this woman, with a scent that is driving the wolf inside me wild, appears to be unaffected by my presence. How very odd.

“I had to find you. I was drawn to you. I believe that you are meant to be mine.”

She snorts and starts laughing loudly. “Is that supposed to be some kind of pickup line? Come on, man. You can do better than that.”

She turns to me and takes my hand, leaning into me and looking me in my eyes as her fingers caress the palm of my hand. “You are the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen,” she says in a low, sultry voice. “When I walked in, I just had to say hello to you. You are a vision.” She tosses my hand back to me. “That’s how you pick up a girl. Try again, sport.”

I’m shocked silent. I’ve never been thrown off so easily before. “What’s your name?” I ask her.

“Yarra.” She looks back at me and studies me for a long moment, as if weighing some imaginary options. “Buy me a drink?”

I raise an eyebrow and smile at her. “Sounds like you’ve already had a few too many.”

She looks back at her half-empty glass and shrugs. “Eh, maybe. It’s been a weird day.”

“You don’t say.”

She nods, finishes the drink in one swallow, then orders another. “You wouldn’t believe what I’ve been through. I’m actually not surprised that you’re here hitting on me.” She gets her drink and takes a sip, then turns to me and asks, “What cologne are you wearing?”

“What?”

“Your cologne? It smells really good, by the way. I don’t think I’ve ever smelled anything like it.”

She surprises me, but I’m smiling. There’s something endearing about how easily she

speaks to me. As if she doesn't realize our connection.

"Yarra," I say, "I think we should get to know each other." My wolf is starting to pace again. It's making me antsy, and my foot starts to tap to some unknown beat. "Or at least go somewhere more private."

She nods sagely. "That's a little better. Much better than the whole 'You're meant to be mine' thing."

"You are meant to be mine." I don't think there's any denying that now that I'm next to her. My mind is starting to whirl with images of her legs wrapped around me, those beautiful eyes filled with passion.

She tilts her head, considering my words. Then her lips curve into a smile, slow and sultry. "I don't belong to anybody, Chad," she says.

"You belong to me. There's no debating that."

She regards me while she drinks, and the wolf inside me feels like it's beating me to death. It wants her. I want her. I don't know how much longer I can . . .

She takes me by the hand and slides off the barstool. "Let's go to your place. I don't think you're allowed in my dorm."

She leads me toward the door, and I follow, doing my best to hold myself together.

I lead her back to my room, which isn't far. As we walk up the stairs, she giggles and says, "I could be walking to my death right now, you know?"

"Your death?" I say as I open the door for her.

“Well, I’m just saying, I don’t know you. And anonymous sex isn’t my normal jam. You could be setting me up right now.”

“It was you who propositioned me. I should think you trust that I won’t do you any harm.”

She gets a look in her eyes like she knows I’m speaking the truth. She walks through the door and says, “Touché, Chad.”

We walk through the hallway leading to my quarters, passing the various paintings of the school’s founding fathers and past Deans. The portrait of the current one, Dean Fowler, is at the end. They’re all variations of the same dignified poses, wearing suits and dresses with splashes of the school colors in ties and flowered lapels.

She’s looking at each of their carefully painted faces with awe, her lips slightly parted. How lovely she looks in this light.

“All the people responsible for Moonhelm,” she drawls. She points to Dean Fowler. “That’s the current guy, right?”

“It is, yes.”

She snickers. “Kind of looks like a bird, too.”

I smile at that. “I assure you, he’s not. Though, I used to say the same thing about him when I was a student.”

“Yeah?”

I nod. “Called him Dean Chicken-Face.”

She raises an eyebrow. “Classy.” She looks back at the paintings and pauses, her smile fading a little. “I think someone removed one.” She points at an empty space on the wall still marked with the imprints of something that had once been hung there.

“Hmm. Perhaps.” I lead her to my door, then unlock it.

“Come.”

She shifts her gaze away, her eyes settling on me. There’s no need for any more words. I can see the passion in her face just by uttering that single word.

As she walks to me, her eyes lock with mine. She moves like a predator, stalking me as I lead her inside.

I reach out and sweep her into an embrace, wrapping my arms around her waist. Her arms drape around my neck, her fingers in my hair. We fit together effortlessly, our movements like a dance to music only we can hear.

We stay that way for a few seconds, an unseen force keeping us still. Her scent engulfs me. The wolf inside me is alive and salivating. She pulls me down to her, and our lips meet, the sweet taste of her mixes with her scent as her tongue finds mine.

I grab ahold of her ass, lifting her up. She wraps her legs around my waist as I swing her around to the desk in the corner of the room. I lean past her for a moment, clearing the surface and knocking away the blotter and penholder. I set her down and kiss her neck, my fangs descending and grazing her skin. My hands move up her thighs and under her leather skirt as she pulls at my shirt until the buttons snap free.

My hands find the silky fabric, and my claws grow and rip through them. I’ve been in this room less than three hours total, and I’m already tearing my way through a woman’s underwear.

I toss the remnants of her panties over my shoulder as she leans in, kissing my chest. She takes a moment and leans back, pulling her blouse off over her head, revealing her pert breasts. I take the first nipple into my mouth, letting my lips close around it and my tongue flick it. Her soft moans are floating through me, driving me to lunacy.

Her hands are running through my hair, and her thighs are high on my waist. I'm so hard from the taste of her skin I feel like I'm going to burst out of my pants. My fangs graze her nipples, and she sucks in a breath. Her nipples get even harder against my tongue.

I can't stand it any longer. I have to have her now. She senses my need, and her hands move down to my pants, unbuckling the belt and pulling out my dick. She grasps it, twisting her hand around my shaft and whispering, "I want you inside me."

The sound of her voice, breathy and desperate, brings the wolf almost all the way out of me. I growl, pulling her to her feet and bending her over the desk. With one swipe of my claw, I tear through the leather fabric of her skirt. She gasps with surprise as my hand moves up the curve of her back and down to her round, juicy ass. I squeeze the cheeks, my claws threatening to pierce her tender skin.

She moves her hips back toward me, urging me on. I slide my clawed hand down between her thighs. She's so wet, she's starting to drip down them. Her scent is so strong now that I feel drunk off it. I lean into her, moving my hands to her hips and pressing the head of my dick against the sea of desire between her legs. I run my tongue up her spine and feel her skin shiver against me.

I thrust deep inside her. Her gasps give way to loud moans as I fuck her against the desk, my senses starting to slip away from me and my wolf beginning to come out.

"Don't stop," she moans, her voice high and desperate. My claws dig in, piercing her skin. The smell of her blood mixing in with her scent is driving me wild.

I grab her hair, pulling her back to me. My mouth finding her shoulder, and an ancient instinct almost takes hold of me. The desire to feel my fangs in her skin, to taste her blood in my mouth . . . the need to mark her as mine forever . . .

Claim her.

The thought echoes in my mind, compelling me. I'm thrusting hard, grabbing her around her slender neck as my instincts force their way forward.

Her moans grow raspy as she leans her head against me, exposing her neck. My fangs are itching to bite into her, to make her truly mine.

I resist, wrapping my arm around her waist instead. My hands move up to her breasts, squeezing them as I let myself go, my climax rising up within me like a tide. She tightens around my dick, her arms wrapping around my head as she leans into me, her legs shaking.

"Oh, God, I'm coming!" she cries out. She grips my dick like a vise. I explode inside her, my wolf howling within me as my moans chorus with hers.

The waves crash over us until I release her. She falls forward on the desk, her back still arched and me still inside her. I lean over her, the wind taken out of me for a moment.

She presses her ass against me, rolling her hips around my dick. "More," she whispers. "Don't stop now."

I lean into her, my face in her violet hair, inhaling her glorious scent. "Yes, my Luna," I moan. I lift one of her legs onto the table, and I thrust deep, beginning round two.

We've been in this room for hours. I'm lying in bed, my hands in Yarra's beautiful purple tresses, watching her lips as they move up and down on my dick. I move her hair out of her face so I can watch, the sight of her sucking me off the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

I don't know what comes next. It's clear that everything my mother said was true about having a fated mate. She is mine. I can see that now. I've never wanted to spend an entire evening in bed with any woman before now.

It doesn't take long for another climax to rise within me. "Faster," I whisper. She speeds up, my hand on the back of her head. I explode in her mouth, thrusting myself down her throat. Moans shake from me, sounds that I've never heard coming out of my mouth.

"Fuck," I moan, leaning my head back onto the pillow. Her mouth leaves me, and it's like the world has gotten colder. I look up to see her looking back at me, her head tilted.

"What?"

"Your eyes . . . Never mind. It must have been a trick of the light."

I smile at her. She's so peculiar. I hadn't seen her eyes change to gold as she came, but then, I wasn't exactly paying attention. I sit up and lean into her.

"Your turn," I say. She smiles and leans back, opening her shapely thighs to me.

I kiss her stomach, moving my tongue down until I'm circling her clit. She gasps, her hands in my hair as she rocks her hips against me.

I could be here forever. Right here, licking her sweet juices for all eternity. I don't

know why I ever doubted the need for this. I don't think I can ever live without it now.

And I've missed the Awakening Fest.

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:34 am

What do you call a person who has sex with a complete stranger on the first day, on her first day of school, during her first solo night out? Yarra. That's what you call her.

I open my eyes and immediately realize three things. One, I'm not in my room. Two, I'm naked. And the third? Who is this man next to me?

The previous night comes rushing back to me as I sit up. The pain of a hangover headache nearly knocks me back down to the pillow. I rub my temples for a moment, trying to figure out how things got so out of control.

I look over at the sleeping man next to me. He's out cold, his head turned toward the window by the bed. This is just great. I haven't even been here twenty-four hours, and I've already gone so far off book with my mission. None of this was part of the plan. Shit.

I sit up and lean over the bed to look for my phone. I see it tangled up in my blouse near the desk across the room. I also spot the rest of my clothes strewn all over the place, the remnants of my leather skirt torn into a single piece of expensive fabric. There's a rag in the corner that I'm pretty sure used to be my panties.

This is so embarrassing. I swing my legs over the side of the bed and glance over at the alarm clock. It's three in the morning. Wow. I need to find something to wear and get the hell out of here. I sure hope Moonhelm doesn't have a curfew.

I get out of bed and grab his pants and my blouse and start putting them on. The pants are baggy on my body, so I search around for his belt, which is over by the desk with

what remains of my panties. Man. I really liked that pair, too.

I glance over at the man in the bed, my brain scrambling to remember his name. Is it Richard? No, Rob. No . . . I know it starts with an R . . .

Is it rude that I don't remember? At least I remember the sex, which was amazing. I don't know who this guy is, but somebody should give him a medal for his sexual prowess.

I cinch the belt tight and pull my blouse over it to hide the bulky waistline. Then I head for the door. Well, this whole time has been full of firsts for me. Now I can check "have a one-night stand" off the list. I pause with my hand on the door. Is it a little rude of me to just . . . leave? Maybe. Hell, I've never done anything like this before. What's the etiquette?

Maybe I should leave a note or something. I walk over to the desk in search of any piece of paper I can write on. There's not much since Chad had the courtesy to clear it off before fucking me into oblivion on it.

That's it! Chad. That's his name!

"Looking for something?"

I startle and whirl around. Chad's sitting up in bed, his sleepy smile directed at me. He runs his hand through his long dark hair. Shit, this man is as gorgeous sober as he was when I was drunk.

"Um . . . no, uh," I stammer. "I just wanted to write you a note. Um . . . before I left. Because that would be rude and . . ." I trail off. I must sound like a crazy person. He just keeps smiling and gets out of bed, rubbing a hand over his face.

He stretches, glancing at the clock as he brings his arms down. Dear God in heaven, this man is magnificent. Naked before me in the dim light, he's tall—practically a giant to my tiny frame. And muscular. His hand listlessly moves over his chest, the light from a streetlamp outside glows on his skin, outlining every ridge. And his eyes . . .

I remember his eyes looking like they were glowing gold whenever he came. Clearly, that was a product of my drunken mind. Right now, though, they are this honey-colored shade of amber. They seem to pick up all the little bits of light in the room around us and shine like jewels in the shadows. His dark hair has fallen down past his shoulders in thick waves, curving over part of his face. He tilts his head at me, a strange smile playing at the corner of his lips.

“You’re leaving.” He doesn’t say it like a question. I look away, my cheeks flushing hot from a mixture of shame and embarrassment.

“Yeah. I really should get back to my dorm.”

There’s a short pause, then, “Okay.”

I nod, half expecting him to show me to the door. He doesn’t. He just stands and watches me. I start to feel a strange pull inside me toward him. I resist it and turn and walk out the door.

The walk back was a little nerve-racking. The further I get from Chad’s place, the darker the walk is. I’m a little pissed that he decided to just let me walk back on my own. I guess chivalry is dead.

My mind starts to replay the evening. For what it was worth, it was nice to be held like that. Nice to be kissed. Even though it got a little rough (as evident from the scratches on my hips and, I’m sure, my ass), I felt desired. Wanted. Maybe even a

little needed. I don't know when I've ever been with someone who made me feel that way.

I turn a corner and quickly realize that I don't know where I am anymore. Jeez, these paths all look the same in the darkness, and I've never been one for directions. I stop for a second to see if I can make out any landmarks. Trees. And more trees. Ugh, this reminds me of this afternoon in the woods.

I put that thought aside, and my mind replaces it with the sex I'd had with the six-foot-plus man I left behind. Immediately, my body reacts to it. I remember the feeling of his hands on my ass, his lips on my neck . . .

I push that away quickly. Now was most certainly not the place or the time.

I should have asked him to accompany me. Maybe since the campus was small, he thought I'd be able to find my way back. I should be able to. I feel like such an idiot getting lost on campus.

I spot a fountain down one of the paths. Wasn't there a fountain in front of the dorm? I think so?

Well, something has to be in front of it, so I make my way there. My mind goes back to Chad and how it felt like I was being pulled toward him before I left. Even in the bar, I knew he wanted me, and, hell, I'm not going to lie. I wanted him, too. But the feeling was . . . I don't know. Ethereal, maybe? The attraction was off-the-scales strong.

Ugh, I need to get back to the dorm and get some sleep. Tomorrow, I have to try again to get my bearings around here so I can get on with finding out what happened to my mother. I swear.

I get to the fountain and stop. What's that smell? Something . . . I don't know. I can't describe it. It's almost like how Chad smells, but . . . sweeter, maybe? I stand there, and for a second, I think I hear a heartbeat. Must be mine, I guess.

The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. I look around through the darkness, but I don't see anything.

“What are you doing?”

I yelp out in surprise as I turn toward the voice. A girl is standing behind me on the other side of the fountain. She looks like a student. Well, she's wearing the uniform, anyway. She's got long straight hair that's a shade of red I've never seen before in my life. She crosses her arms and narrows her almond-shaped eyes.

“What are you doing?” I say back at her, trying to sound tough. My voice betrays me, though. It's too high and shaky. She walks toward me, looking me up and down.

“Hmm, messy hair, an inside out blouse, and clearly somebody else's pants. Looks like somebody's doing the walk of shame.”

I gape at her, offended. Who is she to judge me?

“Oh, don't look so offended,” she says with a roll of her eyes. “I'm doing a walk of my own, too. You're in good company.” She sticks her hand out to me and says, “Saffron.”

I shake it, still a little timid. “Yarra. Nice to meet you.”

She nods. “So, I haven't seen you around here? This your first year?”

“Yeah,” I confess. “My first day, actually.”

She smiled broadly and chuckled. “Your first day and you’ve already got a piece. Damn, girl. You work fast.”

I’m full on blushing now, both embarrassed, but also . . . I start laughing with her. “It just kind of happened. Some guy I met over at Moonlight.”

“Yeah, that’s how it goes. One minute you’re having drinks, the next you’re sucking a dick. Story of the ages.” She glances around and says, “We’d better get back to the dorms, huh? It won’t do for somebody to find two young girls hanging out at three in the morning, right?”

“Right,” I say.

I’m thinking that if we linked arms and skipped, we would probably look spot on. We walk toward the dorm, chatting sparingly as we pass icy-looking statues that cast long, disfigured shadows on the ground. I comment that they look alive under the moonlit glow. Saffron laughs at that, but I find them fascinating. Especially since in this light, the shadows seem to shift and change as we walk over them. I’m sure there’s definitely a logical explanation to why. Maybe some mechanical setup with the statues.

Finally, we arrive at the dorm, and to my relief, the doors are wide open.

“Thanks for leading me back here,” I say to Saffron as we both walk up the stairs. “I thought there’d be a curfew.”

She frowns a little at me but doesn’t respond. As we get to the top of the stairs, she points behind her and says, “I’m this way.”

I do the opposite. “And I’m this way.”

“Yeah. Well, I’ll see you around, Yarra.”

“Right.”

She turns to walk away, and I watch her go for a second before I turn and go back to my room. I’m longing for a long bath and some quality sleep. This whole day was a crazy one. I’m looking forward to starting fresh in the morning.

I wake up to a note on my door and a package. I slept a good chunk of the morning away, but it’s not so late that the lunch rush is happening just yet.

I pick up the package and glance down the hallway. It’s alive with activity. Students coming in and out of their rooms, some on their way to class, others coming back from them.

I take the package back into my room and look at the note. It’s a decorative postcard, the school’s emblem on one side, and in gold print on the other it reads, Welcome to Moonhelm .

It takes a second to compute what I’ve received. A welcome wagon of some sort?

I walk over to my desk and open the package. There’s a manila envelope on top of several uniforms all nicely pressed and folded. I sit down and open the envelope. There’s a schedule and a little map of where all the buildings are.

I guess this is my orientation. I look over my classes, and a couple of them are pretty normal. English 101, social sciences. The rest are courses that I’ve never heard of. First Labor, Second Labor, Fifth Labor. Are those some sort of hands-on courses?

It’s kind of weird that no one asked me what I was here to study or recommend courses I should take. They’re just assigned to me.

It doesn't matter. I'm not here to be a real student, anyway. I'm here to find out about my mom. The first class starts in about an hour. I'd better get dressed and get going.

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I've been lying in bed staring at the ceiling for the last few hours, thinking of her, trying to figure out why she was so quick to leave. She's my mate. She should have been compelled to stay with me.

It doesn't make sense. I fell asleep thinking that I would awaken to her amethyst tresses spread across my pillow, glowing in the morning light. She'd look at me with her sapphire eyes and smile, the knowledge that she'd found me making her feel complete.

Instead, I woke up at three in the morning alone with her trying to leave me a goodbye note. I'm completely thrown by her behavior. I've never been naïve about sex, but this wasn't supposed to be the same thing. Being with her was supposed to be different.

I mean . . . how she felt in my arms was different than any other woman I'd known. Is it possible that she didn't feel the same way about me?

Orange sunlight seeps through the windows of my room and spills onto the bed beside me. She had been lying right there not that long ago. I can still smell her scent on my sheets.

I almost claimed her. I'm surprised I had enough self-control to stop myself, though I'm not sure why I did. She's meant to be mine. It's only natural that she be marked as so.

I sit up in bed and run a hand over my face. Today's going to be a bad day. Hopefully, Mother will forgive me for missing the Awakening. I don't know if I'll

tell her about Yarra. The way Yarra left last night . . . I'd rather not get Mother all excited for nothing.

My mind goes over everything I know about the mating bond as I get up and take a shower. The way it was explained to me, an Alpha's connection to his Luna is biological. I can't resist her any more than she should be able resist me. And yet, she walked away last night as if it were just another one-night stand. It just doesn't make sense.

Maybe, somehow, she's not my Luna. Stranger things have happened.

Or maybe it's the lycan within me. Still poorly controlled after all this time. Never was that more apparent than when I was in bed with Yarra. It was only by the skin of my teeth that I didn't change last night. I shudder to think what might've happened if I had changed and she hadn't. My wolf would have torn her to pieces.

I hate being out of control, and nothing makes me feel more out of control than the animal inside me.

As I get out of the shower, I hear my phone ringing in the next room. I leave the bathroom and grab my phone on my nightstand. Mother. Of course, she's calling at first light to find out where I was.

"Mother," I say. She takes a breath before speaking.

"Well, at least I know you're alive," she growls. "Why weren't you at the Awakening Ceremony last night?"

"I got in late," I lie. "The trip was exhausting, so I laid down to catch a nap. By the time I woke up, it was midnight."

She scoffs. “You lie worse than your father used to,” she says. “I swear, if he’d spent one minute teaching you some manners—”

““Young wolves need no restraints,”” I say, quoting him.

“You are on thin ice already. I’ll thank you not to throw his idioms at me.”

She is pretty pissed. Still, I need her help. If last night was any indication, I need it much sooner than I originally thought. “Listen, Mother, if you’re free today, I’d like to sit down and talk to you about something.”

“I’ll be busy with classes all day,” she said. “You know, if you wanted to talk to me so badly, you should have sought me out last night. You knew where I was then.”

“I realize that, but Mother—”

“You really don’t care very much for me. I ask you to do one thing in coming here, and you couldn’t even do that.”

“I overslept. You can’t blame me for that, can you?”

“Not if it was true. I’m not a fool, Chadwick, and I won’t be made one. If you have something to say to me, then I would advise that you find me if you want to meet with me.”

The line goes dead, and I stare at my phone for some time, as if by some sorcery I can summon her back. I suddenly feel like an asshole. Mother is great at wringing the guilt out of me when she needs to.

Now I’m going to have to “find her,” as if I can’t track her scent in a matter of seconds. It’s hard enough to track anyone on this Lycan-laden campus.

I go through my closet of clothes and pick out a black dress shirt and jeans. I don't have any intention of drawing any attention to myself. I might as well blend in.

A knock at the door echoes through my room. "Mr. Robertson, breakfast is served in ten minutes."

I don't bother responding, and whoever is by the door pauses for a minute before I pick up the sound of retreating footsteps. I'm in a shitty mood this morning, and the last thing I want to do is be anywhere where I might have to hold casual conversations. I'll go down and grab breakfast whenever I'm done looking for Mother.

The morning Labors were beginning. The familiar clang of the bells rolling down the hills and through campus sends chills down my spine. When I was a young wolf with impossible hopes and dreams, the Labors were my worst Lycan exercises. Being introduced to the beast inside you, especially that first time, I can't even fully explain the terror and pain of it breaking free from me.

I make my way to the academic building, where all the lecture rooms are. All around me, students walk by in their pitch-black uniforms, on their way to different destinations. As I move through the crowd of students, I catch a tinkle of laughter, then the unmistakable scent of pine. My mother's nearby.

I start to move in her direction when I'm hit with the sweet, heady scent of my Luna. I stop, compelled to follow that instead. I raise my nose to the air and realize that it's getting stronger. It's coming toward me.

A surge moves through me, my wolf awake and alert. My claws come out, piercing through my fingertips before I can stop it. I gasp and immediately become aware that

my fangs are out as well.

Fuck me. I was triggered easily by her scent and now . . . now . . .

I need to find Mother. My stomach roils with pain, the feeling of my wolf scratching and kicking its way out. I look around frantically for the direction I last smelled my mother. Her scent is so faint under Yarra's.

I pick up a hint of it and bolt in that direction.

A new hunger is upon me. I push it away as I rush toward the academic building.

The hallways are packed with students. Everyone is going about their day without a care in the world. Lucky them. They're not combusting in the middle of campus. I continue down the hall, pushing past a group of laughing students, trying to ignore the fact that my pulse has quickened and a noise rushes in my ears.

If I don't find my mother soon . . . I don't want to know what happens if I don't find her. I'm trying to steady myself to find her scent, but Yarra's scent is overpowering my senses, making it hard for me to focus. Where the hell is she?

My vision abruptly blurs to a hazy red for a second before coming back to normal. That's new. I've never experienced that before.

I hurry past a row of classrooms, everything going by in a hazy blur. I'm lightheaded and my arms are starting to ache from the coming change. I push it back, but I'm losing this fight with every second.

Finally, I spot my mother in the library, surrounded by books as usual. I rush over to her, a sense of relief washing over me the second I see her.

“Mom,” I say. She looks up, and for a split second, she’s scowling, annoyed at me for interrupting her.

Then her eyes soften. She stands to meet me and puts her hands on my face.

“You’re burning up.”

“The wolf,” I try to say, but she puts a hand over my lips.

“Don’t try to talk. Come on. Let’s go to my office.” She places her hand lightly on my lower arm, leading me. The wolf was breaking loose inside me, but I’m still holding the reins, however slippery they are. My mother is here now. If there’s anyone who can stop me from conducting a massacre, it’s her.

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My mother's office is dimly lit. The walls are lined with ancient tomes and magical artifacts. She motions for me to sit down in front of her desk.

"Chad," she says, her voice soft and gentle. "Clearly, you don't have proper control over your lycan."

"What would you have me do?" I say as she walks away, a washcloth in hand. She disappears into the bathroom, and I hear the water running. "I've done everything that I need to do as an Alpha, and more. I've been properly educated. I've been hunting since I was twelve . . . I've even done the Labors at Moonhelm."

She sucks through her teeth as she comes out with a now damp washcloth. "Lean back," she tells me. I lie back in the chair, and she places the rag on my forehead. The coolness feels good against my skin.

"Control over your lycan," she begins, "well, it's less about leashing it and more about accepting it as yourself. It is as much a part of who you are as the human form that you're currently residing in. When you restrain it or neglect it, it becomes wild and independent."

I scoff. "Father never thought of my wolf as being part of me. He always said that it was a beast and I was a man and never the two should meet."

She shook her head. "Your father's philosophy on the lycan inside you has always been outdated at best. Reckless at worst. If he'd just listened to me instead of opting to let you run wild, we might not be here right now. You might even have a mate."

I cringe a little on the inside. Mother has always had this superpower where she would start off being really helpful and then switch into full nagging all of a sudden, and you wouldn't even know how you had gotten to that point. She was also the queen of "I told you so." The last thing I wanted to mention was Yarra.

I don't have the chance to say anything, though. As she looks at me, her eyes widen a little as she stands up from her desk. "Oh, my word. Your mate's here, isn't she? That's why you're having so much trouble today."

"Mother—"

"Don't try denying it. You've encountered her or picked up her scent, and now you've been set off, haven't you?"

I sigh and pull the cloth off my forehead. I could tell her all about our night together. Could even tell her how I almost marked her. If I did, she'd be planning our bonding ceremony by the evening.

"There's a scent . . . of a girl. It sets off my wolf every time."

My mother raises an eyebrow, and I wait for the I told you so to come crashing down. She'd doesn't say it, though. She just crosses her arms and leans back against her desk. But I can tell by the upward lift of her lips that she's ecstatic by this new information.

"Why didn't you mention that sooner?" she asks.

"Well, I just mentioned it, didn't I?"

She ignores that and walks around her desk to her chair and sits down. "So, you caught her scent somewhere on campus? And your wolf went wild?"

She makes it sound so gross. “Mother, could you not . . . put it that way?”

“Why not? That’s what happened.”

I stand up, setting the damp cloth on her desk. “I don’t think I want to talk about this anymore.”

“Have you met with this girl before?” She steeples her index fingers together as looks at me over her half-moon shaped spectacles, scanning my face for my reaction. I stiffen a little. Mother has always been skilled at sniffing out lies.

“I have talked to her,” I admit with as straight a face as I can manage.

“ And? ”

“What do you mean, and?”

“Did you ravage her? Sexually or otherwise? Did your lycan leap out to devour her right there?”

I cringe away from her. “Mother!”

“What? Oh, please grow up. You’re an adult now. We can speak candidly about sexual attraction—”

“If you could stop saying ‘sexual,’ that would be wonderful.”

She sighs, her closed lips curving in a smile, like she’s trying to find the right words to reach me. “If her scent gave you such an extreme reaction, that means something important. You realize that, right? She’s the one you’re fated to.”

There's something about hearing Mother say that out loud that I automatically reject. Maybe it's because she's been trying to push the issue for so long. "I already told you," I say, "I don't need a soulmate. What I need is to find a way to control all this power." My wolf has started to calm down. Maybe it was the cold rag. Maybe it's the high concentration of my mother's scent instead of Yarra's. Whatever it is, it seems to be chilling out right now.

"So, you talked to her," she says with a short nod. "And by just talking to her, your wolf woke up?"

"Yes."

"And nothing else happened? You didn't do anything other than talk?"

She's fishing. I try not to think about last night. The way Yarra felt in my arms. The way she tasted on my tongue . . . how her nails felt in my back.

Most importantly, how calm I felt when I woke up in the middle of the night. My wolf was snug and asleep inside me, as if it had finally been sated after years of thirst. I guess in a way that's exactly what happened.

And then she left. She rushed out of there like she was horrified that I was there with her and—

My muscles tense up at the thought, and a rushing pressure flushes my head. I lean over, my head falling into my hands.

"God, how can I make it stop?"

Mother says nothing as the pressure swells and then recedes in moments. As I lean back in the chair, she says, "You have a wild animal trapped inside you. You need to

learn to tame it. It's long overdue."

"Okay, how do I do that?"

"Well," she says, getting up and walking to one of the cabinets behind her desk. "The way I see it, you couldn't be in a better position to finally solve this problem of yours. I find it funny that all your meditation and 'anger management' techniques are failing you now that you're around real stimuli. I always said it would only be a matter of time."

And there it is. The I told you so . I knew she'd fit it in there somewhere.

"Being at Moonhelm," she went on, looking through cabinet after cabinet, "you've got two advantages: you can commune with your wolf through Labors—"

"Like hell I will."

"And you can get to know your mate a little more . . . intimately. If you haven't already."

"I haven't," I lied. "And even if I have, her smell drives me crazy. If I get close to her, it will get worse."

"Not if you have this." She turns around, holding a small wolf head carved out of what looks like ivory or marble. She turns back around to get a string from the same shelf.

"What is that?"

"It's a totem," she says, threading the string through a loop in the top of the figure's head. "It'll help you control your urges when you're near her."

I roll my eyes. “You could have opened with that, Mother.”

“Why? It’s not going to solve the problem. Your lycan will still want to be free. The totem just helps you build better walls to keep it in while you work to actually fix the problem.”

She hands it to me. I regard the thing in my palm as its frozen snarl stares back at me. “So, you’re giving me a bandage.”

“More like a barrier. Think of it like one of those construction signs that divert traffic when there’s road work. You’ve got your sign, now get to work on fixing the problem. Labors start every morning at ten.” She takes my chin and lifts her face up to me, her dark eyes boring into mine and a soft smile playing at her lips.

“You will find your way,” she says, her voice soft, “but you have to stop being so guarded. This process won’t be easy for you, but anytime you need me, I’m here. Regardless of whatever you think, I’m your mother. I’ll always be present for my son.”

She takes the wolf head from my hand, then places the cord over my head and around my neck. The totem, now a pendant necklace, rests on my chest, and the moment it does, my lycan recedes.

I shut my eyes. She’s right. She’s always right. Maybe if I stopped being so resistant to her, I might get a little farther along in this world. It’s hard, though. Our relationship is complicated, and complicated relationships are never easy to navigate through.

“How do you feel now?” she asks.

“Better.”

“Good.” Her warm lips kiss the top of my head. “I’ve missed you so much, Chad.”

That makes me smile. I missed her, too.

“I was really looking forward to seeing you at the Awakening, but I’m sure you were busy ‘talking’ to your new mate.”

“You should be happy about that,” I tell her, “since you’ve been campaigning so hard for me to find her.”

She gives me a slight smirk. “Touché.” She walks back around her desk. “Come on, I’ve got a class to teach in a few minutes. You could be my aide for the day, if you’d like.”

“I’m not interested in your classes or baby wolves.”

“Oh, but I think you would benefit from this one.” She walks back to her desk and extracts an old brown textbook from a stack of books. “Don’t you want to repay your mother, who literally just saved you from an episode?”

I sigh in resignation. “What’s the class?”

“First Labor.”

I raise my eyebrows. “I thought the Labors were over. You said they were at ten every day.”

“I said they start at ten.”

I scoff. “So, you’re teaching blue bloods now?”

She chuckles. “I really hate that phrase, you know. It never ceases to amaze me how you older ones seem to think you were never brand new at this school. Like you arrived here already initiated.”

“I thought you didn’t teach first years,” I say, correcting myself. She shrugs.

“Who better to usher these young ones into discovering their inner selves than me?”

I shudder, thinking back to my first year. “I still have nightmares about First Labor.”

“Yes, well, you were too busy trying to impress everyone by showing off how ‘tough’ you thought you were. Shall we?” She drops the books with a thump in front of me.

Grudgingly, I pick up the books from the desk and follow her out of the office. The halls are no longer as crowded as they were before. Thank goodness. It’s not as claustrophobic out here now. My mother walks with a brisk pace like she’s always in a hurry to get somewhere. For such a small woman, her legs sure move like she’s eight feet tall.

We get to the classroom, and she stops at the door, turning to me. “Today, just sit quietly. Try not to stand out too much.”

“Gladly.”

We walk into the room, and two things happen at once. A wave of nostalgia comes over me. The room’s decorated with large murals of full moons and wolves running through the woods. The desks and chairs are made from sturdy wood, with the occasional scratch marks from claws digging into them, purposely and not so purposely. The room is full. Every desk has a student in it. I catch a hint of wet fur emanating from one of the students. Someone must have taken a swim before coming

in here.

The second thing I pick up is Yarra's scent. Thick as soup around my head. I feel like I can smell her everywhere. I scan the room and found her relatively quickly. Her amethyst hair is pulled back into a ponytail as she looks down at her notebook.

Then she stops writing, sitting stock still for a moment. My wolf hunkers down, the instinct to stalk and pounce igniting within me. She looks up at me directly. Her eyes widen with surprise. I turn away, pressing on the wall around my lycan to keep it silent.

"Good morning." My mother's voice rings out, her greeting holding a sort of authority that demands immediate attention. I watch as the rustling of conversation comes to a stop as soon as she makes herself known. No surprise there. Mother is at the top of her game. She was once awarded Exemplar Educator of the Era, an equivalent of a Nobel Prize in human circles.

"My name is Jean Robertson, and I will be your instructor for the entire Labor duration."

I drop her pile of books on the desk at the front of the room, then find a chair in the corner.

"Welcome to your First Labor class, where we will embark on a journey of self-discovery and unleash the lycan within you."

I spot some excited looks around the room. Like a moth drawn to light, my eyes gravitate back to Yarra, who only looks puzzled. She glances around, feigning a soft smile. Her hair is barely held in place by a black hair tie, and her eyebrows are slightly knit together, like she's trying and failing to fully understand what's going on. I can feel her perplexity from here.

“It’s important for every young wolf to come to terms with themselves and embrace the beast that resides inside. Remember, each one of you is unique and will emerge at your own pace, so there’s no need to feel pressured. Just relax and know that you’re doing great. Are you all ready to begin?”

Affirmations rise up from the students. All except Yarra. She stays quiet, fiddling with her pencil. Her eyes are wide. Something is wrong here. Maybe she thinks she’s in the wrong room?

“Now,” Mother continues, “everyone, close your eyes and focus on your breathing. In and out. In. Out. Come on, let’s go.”

Everyone shuts their eyes and follows Mother’s instruction. I watch as Yarra shuts her eyes as well, her chest slowly rising and falling. The memory of her breasts heaving as I looked down at her on my bed, the way the light hit her skin, the way her nipples were so hard they could have cut glass . . .

I look away from her. My wolf is alert, but the urge to free him is muted. I guess this totem really does work.

“Feel the heat that bubbles up from your lungs to your nose,” my mother says. “Let it flow. Allow the thoughts to overcome you. Taste the air, listen to the stars, just breathe.”

Slowly, the students start to change, their bodies contorting and their limbs elongating as they transform. The sounds they make are low and menacing. Growls and whines rumble around the room. Some of them manage to transform completely, becoming large animals and pushing away from their desks to get on all fours. Others are stalled at various stages.

“Excellent! Remember, don’t push it. Your lycan will come to you when it’s ready.”

My mom walks among them, observing the transformed and offering guidance and encouragement. “Yes, that’s it. Hold it in, don’t panic, just breathe. Remember, in and out, in and out.”

I look over at Yarra. She opens her eyes for a moment, then shuts them quickly, her entire body stiffening. Her heartbeat is loud in my ears. It’s racing a million miles a minute. I frown as I sense something unexpected from her. Fear. Real, genuine terror.

I tilt my head as I watch her grip her desk as her body starts to shake. She looks as though she wants to bolt. Like a terrified rabbit.

Like a human.

No, that’s crazy. For a million different reasons. For one thing, she doesn’t smell human. At all. For another, why would she choose to take classes at Moonhelm without knowing what she was getting into? And a Labors class at that?

No, no. This isn’t right. She’s not a human. She simply can’t be. But if she’s not, why is she so terrified?

Soon enough, the growls begin to turn into howling. And howls are always like a chain reaction. When one wolf gets going, others are sure to join in. The room starts to fill up with the chorus of wolf calls, echoing off the walls and creating a beautifully eerie but exhilarating atmosphere. The sound gets my heart racing. I almost want to change too, just to howl with everyone else.

I see the look of pride in my mother’s face, and she even laughs out loud and claps her hands joyfully. “Perfect, perfect! Now. I need you all to change back. Don’t worry. This part is easy. Just let go. Your wolf will know where it belongs inside you.”

They begin to change back to their human forms. Those who changed completely lost their uniforms. They lay in piles by their desks. But none of that matters. The students are all panting and sweaty with a newfound sense of pride and accomplishment. The few who did not change look disappointed. Some of them are looking over at their naked classmates longingly.

But not Yarra. She's sitting there with her head down, still gripping the desk like it's about to take off at eighty miles an hour. The fact that she didn't change today isn't unusual, but her reaction is.

"Congratulations," Mother says. "Your progress is exceptional! If you didn't shift forms today, don't worry. Tomorrow could be your day. It's all a process, and every wolf is different. Trust me, though. Before this class is over, you will get to taste the rush of the wild!"

The class goes on for another few minutes with my mother discussing aspects of the change, but I'm not paying attention. I'm watching Yarra, whose eyes are on the door.

And before I know it, Mother has dismissed the class. Not surprisingly, a number of students pool around her, asking questions.

Yarra gathers her books quickly, then gets up to leave. I watch her go, desperate to follow her, to find out what's going on in her mind. Why was she so frightened?

I will say one thing about this totem. It's allowing me to think rationally in Yarra's presence. I'm more concerned about her reaction to all this than my wolf's need to mount her.

I'm going to have to find her. Maybe it's concern or curiosity, I don't know. But I need to know what the story is with her.

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:34 am

I 'm standing outside the academic building, off to the side and out of sight and having a fucking heart attack.

What the hell did I see back there?

I wish I'd kept my eyes closed. I couldn't though. As soon as the growling started, I had to open them. I had to see . . .

Oh, God, what did I see?

One of the rumors that has been going around about Moonhelm for years was that it was a school for the paranormal. But then, people say stuff like that all the time about creepy places. I was thinking it was haunted or something. Not this! Never in my wildest dreams did I ever think . . .

No one can ever be prepared to witness a dozen werewolves transforming in a classroom. It took everything in me not to scream out in horror the moment every human in my classroom started to morph into hairy animals.

And now another possibility has come to mind. I didn't change like the rest of them. It's only a matter of time before they figure out I'm not one of them. I'm on a ticking clock now to find out what happened to my mother and get the hell out of this place.

I take several big breaths, my hand on my chest. I need to calm down. Yeah, this is pretty fucked up, as far as fucked up things go, but I've gotta keep my head. There's too much at stake for me to lose it now. Even though all I want to do is go the fuck home.

Cole. I need to talk to Cole.

I pull out my cell phone, and I'm just about to dial his number when the warning he told me on the day we met at the coffee shop rings back in my head. There are people in high places in this school that know everything that goes on. They probably monitor and listen in on phone calls. Now that I've seen what I've seen, I wonder if he meant technology or preternatural night-vision eyes and ears that hear sounds miles away.

What am I going to do? And how in the world was my mother connected to these . . . creatures?

I know one thing. Cole needs to know this new information. Maybe he has some kind of an idea of what's going on here. I look at my phone once again, thinking it over for a long moment. Fuck it. I have to get a message to him. I frantically type a text message to Cole telling him to meet me by the highway, just by the turn that leads to Moonhelm.

After a few minutes, he replies with an okay , and I delete the entire conversation.

“Hey! Yarra, right?”

I look up sharply to see the girl I had met earlier this morning. Her blazing red hair is neatly combed out, and her uniform is nicely pressed. She's smiling and studying me with eyes that I can now see are a shade of baby blue.

“Yes. Uh . . . ?”

She shakes her head. “The one-night-stand girl has forgotten me so soon.”

I roll my eyes and chuckle. A bit of my fear broke up in the sound. “No, Saffron. I

can never forget a comrade.”

She nods. “Fair enough.”

I didn’t see her in my class, but that doesn’t mean anything as far as I’m concerned. For all I know, everybody here is a werewolf, including her. The waves of panic start to hit me again.

“Hey, are you okay?”

“Yeah.” My voice is a little too high. I clear my throat. “Yes, fine. I’m, uh, I’m just tired, that’s all.”

“Tell me about it. Hanging out all night had me wired when I got back to my room. I’ve been dragging all day.”

I laugh, but it doesn’t sound very convincing.

Saffron’s eyes study me carefully, and I picture myself being cornered by a wild hound, sniffing me, looking for the slightest hint of fear to pounce on me.

“So, I noticed you didn’t shift forms in class today,” she says.

I’m so thrown off by her directness all I can say is, “What?”

“It’s cool. I didn’t either. You know, it’s like Mrs. Robertson said. Everyone morphs in their own time.”

I blink at her. I hadn’t seen her. You would think I’d have spotted that red hair right off. “You were in my class?”

“Duh.”

“Oh.” My mind scrambles, the refrain to “act natural” loud and clear. “Um, yeah, I guess we all come to it eventually.”

“Yeah, yeah. So don’t beat yourself up about it.”

“Hmm?”

“You look a little stressed. The way you bolted out of the room and everything. You seemed upset.”

I could almost laugh. Of course somebody noticed how terrified I looked. I am blowing this without even realizing it now.

“I also noticed you were staring an awful lot at the hot guy in the corner,” she says with a little smile.

I’m shocked silent for a second. “I—uh . . . what guy? You mean, the teacher’s aide?”

Saffron shrugs. “You weren’t exactly being discreet about it. Neither of you. He was your one-night guy, wasn’t he?”

My face gets beet red with embarrassment. Yeah, I need this right now. “Listen, Saffron, if it’s all the same to you, I’d rather not talk about it.”

“Wow. He was that bad, huh? Who would’ve thought the teacher’s son would be a lousy lay.”

She glances at her phone while I stand there, my mouth dropped to the floor. The

teacher's son?! Oh, that's just fucking perfect!

Saffron is already walking away. "I've got Lunar next."

I groan and tag along behind her.

"Hey Saffron, wait up!"

She turns around, but she doesn't stop walking. I get up to speed with her until we're both walking together at the same pace.

"Do you know anything about the history of this school?" I ask.

Saffron scowls a little. "What do you mean? Like when it was founded and all that?"

"Yeah. Or if there's a list of students who attended?"

She chuckles, "You doing a paper or something?"

"Something like that."

She shrugs. "I don't really know much about it. It's been around for as long as I can remember. My grandparents on my mom's side went here, so I guess it's been around for a while."

"Interesting," I say, thinking out loud.

"What's interesting?"

"Um, nothing, just that my mother never mentioned anything about this school to me, and supposedly, she went here too." I'm not really too keen anymore on my mother

being a student here. Maybe she was like me. A human in the middle of a wolf-fest.

“Parents are weird like that,” Saffron says. “Or, in my case, guardians. My grandparents raised me, so what do I know, really? My grandparents, though, who knows what they got up to in this place?”

“Is it possible to graduate from this school without finding your . . .” I lost the word. What had Ms. Robertson called it?

“Lycan?”

“Yeah, that.”

Saffron chuckles brightly. “I mean, yeah. Of course. But what would be the point of graduating if you never found yourself? Can you imagine trying to navigate in the rest of the outer world without knowing anything about your lycan? You’d probably go nuts, assuming some hunter didn’t gun you down in the woods somewhere.”

I’m thinking about the papers I found. The diploma proving that she’d graduated from here. If she graduated, then maybe she . . . maybe . . .

I start to lose my breath again, and I slow down, then stop, bending over and bracing myself with my hands on my knees. Saffron stops and comes over to me. “Hey, it’s all right.” She rubs my back. “Don’t stress about it too much. You know, you’ll change just like all of us do eventually. That’s, like, the easiest part of school. This is just your, what, first day of classes, and you’re already worried about graduation? You’re a real high achiever.”

“Yeah, maybe,” I say as I catch my breath. I stand up straight and try to smile so Saffron knows I’m okay. But I’m not okay. If only she knew how scared I truly am. I wish I could tell her.

We walk in silence for a few more moments before Saffron speaks up again. “You know, I think you’re going to do great here.”

She hits me with a smile, so I smile back, feeling a little more confident than before. I wish I had her confidence. But then if I did, that would mean I’d know what was really going on around here. I just hope I can figure out what happened to my mom before I’m found out.

It’s a few minutes past midnight, and although the school is quieter than it was during the daytime, a few people are still up around the campus. All day, I’ve been thinking of the best way to sneak out of the school gates without being noticed. I don’t remember seeing any guards patrolling the school grounds, but it’s not like I was looking before now, either.

I asked Saffron earlier about it in passing. Right after English class, I asked her what the security was like around here. She just laughed. “It would be unwise to attack a school full of werewolves. I’m sure there are psychopathic Lycans already within these walls.”

Heh. Funny. Not really. Not to me. I fake-laughed along with her, though.

But that was good news, at least. I could walk right out of the gate without being stopped.

I pull the hood of my jacket up as I creep out of my dorm room, and my heart begins to pound with fear. It won’t look good for me if I’m caught. Maybe they’ll drag me back and figure out that I’m human.

I am human. My mom might not have been, but I know I am. Even if I’m not, I’m not

really ready to face the facts. I make my way through the dark hallways, my senses on high alert for any signs of danger.

The moonlight filtering in through the windows gives me just enough light to see where I'm going. Outside the dorm, I don't spot anyone, and I slip out, immediately feeling like I'm being watched. Jeez, I think I've always felt like I'm being watched. Ever since I got off the airplane.

It doesn't take long for me to spot the gates. No one's out here, but maybe they're just hiding in the shadows. I pause to stare at it from a distance. It feels like a trap.

My own anxiety is getting the better of me. What if they find out I'm a human who's seen too much? My heart is pounding like a damn drum.

I think of Mom. Missing for years. The owner of a small store in a small town who had never said an unkind word to anybody. I've gotta take this risk. This is where she graduated, and it's probably connected to why she's gone. Cole has more clues than I do at the moment. He's the only person I can trust to help me unravel this mystery.

As I step forward, the cool night air hits me like a wave. I take a deep breath, trying to steady my nerves, and make my way to the edge of the academy grounds. I'm ready for anything, but I keep placing one foot in front of the other until I reach the wrought-iron gate. I slip through a tiny opening and have to stop myself from running away.

I walk down the boulevard, the tall palm trees whispering down to me, watching my every step with interest.

It takes me almost five minutes, but I eventually arrive at the bend. I see Cole under the moonlight, smoking a cigarette like he was just standing on a street corner. He spots me and nods his head my way.

“Hey, Yarra. You made it.”

“Yes. We have a problem. Why didn’t you tell me about this place?”

He frowns a little, then replies, “I believe I told you it was a strange place.”

“Werewolves?” I hissed it to keep from screaming. “There are literal werewolves there, Cole!”

He looks away, then takes another drag and flicks the cigarette into the road. “Come on, we shouldn’t stay here in the open for this long. My car is parked over there.” He points to the black sedan across the road, hidden perfectly in the shadows.

“How?” I say to him as we start walking. “How are there werewolves—”

“Not out here,” he says, cutting me off. “We can talk in the car.”

We get to the car, and he unlocks it. I walk around to the passenger’s side as he gets in the driver’s seat. The doors shut with a single thud that resonates in the quietness.

“Moonhelm is a school for werewolves,” he says. “Specifically. Sometimes other creatures attend. It’s not unheard of, entirely, but it’s made and designed for werewolves to integrate them into the real world.”

I blink. I can’t believe what he’s saying. If I hadn’t seen what I’d seen, I wouldn’t believe him.

“Mystical creatures are not merely fairy tales,” he goes on. “They tell you these things so you don’t suspect that they exist. Even if you see something supernatural, your mind won’t believe it because you’ve been conditioned to believe certain things and reject others.”

“Who’s conditioning us?”

“Them. These creatures are in every single part of the world, and they rule us without us ever knowing their true nature.” Goosebumps rise from my arms as he speaks. I hug myself.

“Tell me what you saw,” he says after I remain silent, thinking about what he just said.

I tell him everything, excluding the whole sleeping with Chad thing, of course. I tell him about the graveyard I found and about my nightmares. I even tell him about the missing painting I had seen on a wall, being sure to keep from mentioning that it had been on Chad’s wall.

He’s looking at me with a serious expression the whole time. I stop talking, and he’s silent for a long moment. “Doesn’t sound like you’ve found much. The graveyard thing I’ll have to think some more about, but you’ve only been there a couple of days. I didn’t expect much. Sorry about the whole werewolf thing. If I’d told you about it before, I doubt you would have believed me.”

I can’t exactly disagree with him there.

“Have you found anything new on my mother’s case?” I ask him. He shakes his head.

“Not yet. But I have a lead on a woman who might have some information about her disappearance. I will talk to her as soon as possible.”

“Really? Who is she?” I ask, leaning forward.

“She’s a former teacher at Moonhelm Academy,” Cole replies. He rolls down the window and pulls another cigarette out of his pocket. “Her name is Dr. Olivia

Williams. I think she might have some knowledge about the academy's inner workings."

"Do you think she knows something about my mom?"

Cole hesitates for a moment before answering, lighting up his cigarette and taking a drag. "I can't say for sure, but it's worth a shot. We need to be careful, though. Moonhelm is a dangerous place, and we don't want to attract any unwanted attention."

I nod in agreement. "So, where is this Dr. Williams anyway? Maybe I can track her down and talk to her."

"Leave that to me. I'll do some digging into her and see where she is now. You just keep your head down for now." He takes another puff from his cigarette, then says, "In the meantime, be careful and keep your eyes open. We don't know who we can trust."

I take a breath of relief and lean back in the seat, the weight of the situation lightening a little. With Cole by my side, I'm sure we'll find the answers we're looking for.

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:34 am

“Is this what you do all day? Lie around half-naked?”

Mother’s standing in my doorway, looking me over with a raised eyebrow. I’m not naked. I’m in sweatpants, and it’s early in the morning.

“Good morning to you, too,” I say as I step aside. She walks in and looks over my room, running a finger along the end table near the door.

“You really should get someone to dust in here. It’s filthy.”

I sigh as she looks around, her eyes roaming as if she were just casually looking for something—or someone.

“What can I do for you, Mother?”

She turns around and smiles at me. “How is your wolf this morning?”

“Ever since you gave me this”—I point to the totem necklace I’m still wearing—“I’ve been all right.”

“Hmph. I see.” She walks all the way in, still glancing around. “Do you have a teapot in your room? Shame. You really should have one for guests.”

Her tone’s flat and dismissive. She couldn’t care less about a teapot. “You gave me the totem to suppress my lycan,” I say, “and you’re not pleased. I would have thought you’d be jumping for joy that one of your remedies worked.”

She cuts me a look over her shoulder, then takes a seat at my desk. I stiffen. The memory of bending Yarra over it comes back to me in a flash. I hope Mother doesn't pick up her scent.

"I would be jumping for joy if you were actually working on the other things I told you to do as well."

I roll my eyes. Here it comes. The nagging. "Mother, I really am not in the mood for this today."

"When are you ever in the mood? Especially lately? You've been walking around with a dark cloud over your head for an eternity. If I waited for you to be in the mood, I'd never be able to tell you anything."

I cross my arms, her attack feeling like angry pinpricks. She goes on.

"You need to do your Labors, Chad. The totem alone won't solve your problem. You need to commune with your lycan if you want to keep it under control. There's no avoiding it."

"Mother, I went through the Labors already when I was a student. I don't want to do them again."

"Too bad," she says. "You need to be in sync with your wolf. You are a fully realized Alpha with a lycan who's not tamed. Quick fixes aren't going to solve your problem. Like it or not, you will have to do the work."

I sigh and run a hand over my hair, still messy from sleep. "Mother . . . I did them before, and clearly that didn't work. And now you're telling me to do them again. I just don't see how that will help me."

She looks at me with soft eyes and shakes her head. “You were young when you were at Moonhelm,” she says, “eager to get through your classes and graduate and get out into the world. You never understood why you had to pay your dues. You only saw the finish line. I know you weren’t focused enough to get what you needed to get out of the process.”

I look down at my bare feet, a little shamefully. She’s not wrong. I wanted to get school done and over with so I could get on with life. “So,” I say, looking back up at her sheepishly, “maybe I took some shortcuts. But I wouldn’t have graduated if I couldn’t complete the tests. And I did. That has to count for something.”

She stands up and walks over to me, her warm hand cupping my face comfortingly. “There are no shortcuts for wolves,” she says. “You must realize that now. Connecting with your wolf is the only way to gain control of it. And you can do that through the Labors, if you take them seriously.”

“So I have to start all the way at the First Labor?”

“No,” she chuckles, “of course not. You and your wolf are well acquainted. Beginners courses aren’t going to help you much. I would say you’d do better to go through the Fifth Labor.”

I cringe. I have bad memories of the Fifth Labor.

“Luckily for you, I know a very good teacher who I’m sure would be glad to take you on.”

“I’m not going to attend classes like a blue—” I stop myself. Her smile falters, giving me a silent warning. “I’m not going to sit in class again for some meaningless bonding.”

“Meaningless,” she scoffs. “You almost changed in a hallway full of students, and you call this meaningless? I wish I had your stones.”

“Mother, please.”

“Her name is Professor Julia,” she says, stepping away from me. “Her class starts in about an hour, so you should probably get dressed and head over there.”

“You want me to go today?”

“Yes. I want you to go today,” she says, a slight stern tone in her voice. “That totem isn’t going to hold your lycan back forever, so the sooner you get started, the better.”

I touch the pendant around my neck gingerly. A bandage. That’s all it really is. I guess a part of me thought that I’d be able to just keep the totem forever. There really aren’t any easy fixes.

“I’ve got a class to teach in a couple of hours,” she says, walking toward the door. “I need to go prepare for them. I expect you’ll be in Professor Julia’s class when it starts. I’m going to ask about you when I see her around lunchtime.”

“You make it seem like I have a choice.”

“Oh, darling,” she says with a laugh, “you always have a choice. Right now, your options are to let your wolf take over and potentially ruin your life or to get control of it. Seems fairly simple to me.”

She opens the door and gives a little wave as she leaves. “Ta-ta, dear.”

The door closes, and I feel my wolf pacing behind the wall of the totem’s power. I do feel it a little more than I did yesterday. I guess it is only a matter of time.

“Shit,” I swear as I turn to my closet to get my clothes.

I’m standing in front of Professor Julia’s classroom door, taking a few breaths before I walk in. I’m a couple of minutes late, so I know that the class is already full of students.

This is so beneath me. I can’t believe Mother is recommending that I sit in a classroom full of whelps who barely know who they are. This is humiliating, to say the least. What Alpha ever went back to school to relearn control? If any of my pack back home found out about this, the respect I would lose would be monumental.

I take one last deep breath, and then I turn the knob and walk into the room. Just as I imagined, every desk was full of students. They had been looking toward the front of the room a half second ago, and now they’re all looking at me.

“Hello, may I help you?” The professor in the front of the room was an older woman about Mother’s age with salt-and-pepper hair and kind eyes. She had her hair pulled back into a bun and round glasses sitting on the edge of her nose. I straightened up slightly.

“I’m Chadwick Robertson. Jean Robertson’s son. She asked me to come by your class.”

Her face warms with a welcoming smile. “Yes, of course!” she says. “Come in. Please.”

She turns to the class as I enter, and she introduces me, “Class, please welcome Mr. Robertson. He’ll be assisting me for the rest of the semester.”

I nod to the class shortly. Then I sit in the chair in the corner of the room. Thank goodness she introduced me as her assistant. This whole thing is embarrassing

enough.

“There’s a desk behind the class, Chad. If you could sit there please?”

I pause and spot the desk in the back of the room. I smile and make my way toward it. As I sit down, I can’t shake the feeling of being back in class again. Sure, everyone believes I’m just an assistant, but sitting here makes me feel like I’m among the masses.

The door opens again just as Professor Julia is about to speak. I catch a whiff of Yarra before she even steps through the door. My wolf sits straight up, straining against the power of the totem. My heart instantly starts to race, and my hands get sweaty.

Stand down, I think, giving the wolf a push. It seems to work. My heart is starting to slow down.

“Sorry,” she says meekly. “I got lost.”

“It’s all right,” Professor Julia says. “We were just about to start. Sit anywhere.”

She looks around the room and immediately sees me. Her eyes widen slightly, and she looks away quickly. She moves down the row to the empty seat next to a girl with long red hair.

“Now,” the professor says, “you now know that you have a lycan inside you, and that’s just one aspect of your discovery. In this class, you will learn that your lycan is a totally independent entity with its own mind and desires. You and your lycan are one and the same, but you are also two separate beings. Here we will discuss what your lycan likes, what it dislikes, how it feels. Is it a stone-cold killer, or does it prefer to sleep in fields of daisies? Here is where you find out.”

I'm trying to focus on the professor, but Yarra's scent is pulling all my focus toward her. I look at her out of the corner of my eye, her electric purple hair tied back as it had been yesterday. She is just as lovely as she was before. My wolf is pacing within me, still secure in its cage.

The redhead next to her suddenly turns to look at me, a blank expression on her round, doll-like face. I notice that her hair is a little too red, like she dyed it. A chill shoots down my spine as we lock eyes for half a second. Then, her upper lip lifts in a smirk, and she winks at me before turning away.

I frown . . . and notice my wolf has been silenced. Interesting. She reads as a Beta, yet there's something off about her.

"All right. Let's partner up."

I'm brought out of my thoughts as the room erupts with the students all finding partners to pair up with. Professor Julia nods to me, urging me to pay attention. I give her a firm nod in response.

"I know that for many of you, this is your first class," she says, "but I'd like to try something a little different. Quickly find your partners."

Yarra immediately teams up with the redhead. As I watch, they chat with one another and smile. They know each other. Hmm.

"Now," the professor says once everyone has their partners, "you're going to change, and I want you to attempt to communicate by mind-link. It doesn't have to be a whole conversation, just a few words between the two of you. Then change back."

This being day two, everyone should be familiar with the effects of the change, so the students start to take off their uniforms. At First Labor, Mother always asks everyone

to bring a spare so that they don't have to walk around naked all day. I was a little surprised that so many wolves didn't think to do that in the first place.

But now, everyone's on the same page. Everyone except Yarra, it seems. She's averting her eyes as the redhead takes off her uniform.

"Now, for those of you that haven't had the opportunity to meet your wolf yet," Professor Julia says as she walks around the class, "don't worry if you don't change. If that happens, I want you to be friendly to your partner's wolf. Touch them, pet them, connect with them in whatever way they allow."

Yarra's still looking out of place, that same terrified look in her eyes as before. The redhead takes her hand and says something that makes her smile. That's good. Maybe this class will go better for her than First Labor did.

"All right. Whenever you're ready. Please begin."

Professor Julia moves to where I'm sitting and motions for me to stand with her. As the students all started to change, she leans in and whispers, "So, your mother briefed me on what you've been going through."

"Mm-hmm," I respond stiffly.

"I think you would benefit from a private lesson. The Fifth Labor is important to master as it gives you the first introduction to controlling your wolf properly. Mind-linking is difficult to do with a wild wolf, but if you can achieve it, you'll be one step closer to gaining control over it."

"So . . . this. Pairing up and shifting. You want to do that with me?"

"To begin with. If that's all right with you?"

What can I say? Mother talks about me having a choice, but let's be real. The alternative is hardly an option that anyone would want. "Sure," I say. "That works."

"Marvelous. Walk around and observe the students. We can talk about whatever you picked up in a later session."

We separate to watch the students, and I head toward Yarra. She and her partner haven't started yet. They're still talking. It looks like the redhead is still trying to console her. I stay back, watching from a distance as they speak in rushed whispers. Finally, the redhead takes a step back and says softly, "Here we go."

She throws her head back and starts to shift. Her body morphs and changes, bones twisting and cracking as they move into unnatural positions. Yarra looks on, wincing as streaks of crimson fur appear all over the redhead's body.

She stands before Yarra, a large blood-red wolf with deep red eyes. My wolf is on its feet, and the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

She's a Scarlet Wolf. Shit. My lycan snaps within me, bucking furiously to protect Yarra. I don't know how this wolf got into Moonhelm or why they're allowing her to be with other students. Don't they know how dangerous Scarlet Wolves are?

Yarra takes a deep breath and steps toward her, her hand stretched out. I want to stop her. I want to warn her not to touch that wolf. I don't move. I look around to see if anyone else has noticed. If the professor is going to stop this.

"If you have established communication with your partner, try giving it a command," she says. "You can ask them to sit or talk about the weather if you like. The point is to communicate."

I'm not paying attention to the professor now. I'm watching as Yarra edges closer to

the beast, then, with shaky hands, touches the wolf's head and runs her fingers through the blood-red fur. She smiles and laughs nervously as the Scarlet leans into her and nuzzles her hand.

The Scarlet suddenly turns and cocks her head, then leans back and sits on her haunches. Yarra's smile widens. "Good dog," she says with a laugh. "Or wolf. Good wolf."

I blink, confused. What just happened? Did she mind-link with a Scarlet? How is that possible?

"Great job," Professor Julia says as she passes Yarra. "Just imagine what it'll be like when you change and mind-link. It'll be so much easier, trust me."

Yarra looks happy. Accomplished. I guess I can relate. To feel like you've completed a difficult task with your wolf. I'm not there yet. Suddenly, I'm looking forward to these private sessions. I long for that level of control.

"Ten more minutes," the professor says, "Then we'll move on." She looks over at me and gives me a thumbs up. Yeah, maybe there was something to be gained here after all.

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:34 am

All I can think of as I sneak toward the school gate is the incredible thing that had happened to me in Fifth Labor class. I don't even fully understand it.

I had no idea what "mind-linking" was when the professor mentioned it. I, of course, asked Saffron, who, after giving me a strange look, explained that it was just communicating telepathically.

"But don't worry," she said while she was taking off her clothes, "if you don't change and can't mind-link with me, just give me a good rub behind the ears."

I laughed at that. I figured that's all I'd have to do in class. Easy-peasy.

Then I was standing there, and I realized I could hear her thoughts. I can't explain it. My thoughts felt like cold water trickling down the sides of my head when I faced the giant red wolf that was once Saffron.

But then, I just gave into it, and . . . I told her to sit. And she did!

Wait until I tell Cole about this. Humans and werewolves can communicate telepathically? Oh, how great is that?

I slide through the gates and run to our meeting place. This time, I spot Cole's car right away, walk over to it, and open the passenger's side door. He jumps, looking over at me with surprise as I shut the door.

"Humans can speak to werewolves with telepathy!"

He pauses, his red eyebrows furrowing. “What?”

“Telepathy. Humans and werewolves can communicate telepathically. Isn’t that great?”

He shakes his head. “No, it’s weird. And impossible. Humans aren’t telepathic at all by nature, much less with werewolves. Why do you think that? Did something happen?”

I look away from him, going back over it in my head. I was certain that I connected with Saffron. I know that I did . . . didn’t I? “I . . . I don’t know. I thought . . . I don’t know what I thought.”

He continues to look at me, his brow deeply furrowed now. “I asked you to come out here because I found something out from the source I looked into. The teacher that used to work at Moonhelm?”

I blink and focus back on him. “Right, right. What did you find out?”

Cole pauses, then continues, “There’s no better way to say this, so I’ll just say it. Apparently, your mother was a witch at Moonhelm.”

“What?” I say with a laugh. “Come on, Cole.”

“It’s true.”

“Ignoring the fact that you’re telling me that witches are a thing now, you said that Moonhelm is a school for werewolves. How can my mother have been a witch if she graduated from here?”

He shrugs. “That part I can’t say. Look, the one thing we both know for sure was that

she was a student here. Whatever she was, she most certainly wasn't human."

I glare at him, a mix of anger and fear swirling around inside me. How dare he speak the thing that I wasn't ready to acknowledge.

"The story is," he goes on, "that she kept getting into trouble because she was struggling to control her powers. She was a great student, and once she'd graduated, they invited her back to lecture, but—"

"Stop, stop a second." My heart is beating in my ears now. My mother . . . a witch? I don't understand any of this.

"I know this is hard to understand, but we can't ignore the facts. Humans don't come to Moonhelm."

I feel like I'm going to throw up. "So . . . so that makes me a witch, then?"

"I don't know what it makes you. I also don't know how a witch goes to a college for werewolf studies. There are clearly a lot of pieces missing still. I think that her being a witch might be connected to her disappearance. Magical supernaturals and wolves have a complicated history. There might be something there."

Magical supernaturals? This is too much for me to handle. Suddenly, I feel the need to speak to Nana. She probably knew all about this place. No wonder she didn't want me coming here.

"I think I'd better go," I say to him. "I need to process this."

"I understand," he says. I go to leave, but he stops me with a hand on my arm. "Do yourself a favor and educate yourself a little about this world. It might give you some idea as to why your mother might have come to Moonhelm in the first place. And

maybe that'll lead us to finding out what happened to her."

I nod. "Okay. Good night, Cole."

"Good night."

I leave the car and head back, my mind buzzing with the new information. That's probably why I could do the whole mind-link thing. If humans can't do it, but I can . . . and if my mother was a witch . . . then I must be too, right?

Cole is right. I need to find out what's what.

I'll start with Nana. She has to know that Mom was a witch.

I get back to my room and sit down on my bed without turning on the light. The dark is comforting right now, and I can think a little before doing what I have to do.

I'll be waking her up if I call her now. I don't think I care. I need to know.

I turn on the lamp by my bed, and I pull out my phone. I'm a little nervous about this. What if she tells me something about my mom that I can't handle?

I think back to what Cole said about her being a witch at Moonhelm, and I know that I need more information. Like it or not, Nana might have some of the puzzle pieces.

I pull my legs up and sit cross-legged on the bed. I call Nana. The phone trills in my ear for three agonizing rings before she picks up on the fourth.

"Nana?"

"Yarra?" Her voice sounds thick with sleep. She breathes deeply, then says, "What

time is it? Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. I just need to ask you something . . . and it's important, so I need you to tell me everything that you know."

"Well, what is it?"

I take a breath. She might laugh me off the phone. Might tell me that I've lost my mind asking her something so ridiculous. I kind of hope she will. If she does, then maybe it's a lie. Maybe there's no such thing as witches.

"Yarra?" she urges. "Talk to me."

"Nana," I say, "was Mom a witch?"

She goes silent. There's no sound right now but the pounding of my heart in my ears. "Nana?"

"I think that it's time you came home, honey," she says.

My eyes start to burn with tears. "I can't. Not yet. Nana, I have to know. Please." I'm trying not to sob. Trying desperately to keep it down. But my breath is shaky, and I can hear my own anguish in my voice. Nana sighs.

"There's a lot of your history you don't know. It's not something that we should talk about over the phone like this. We can discuss it when you come back home."

"Okay," I say to her, "but . . . but for now, just tell me if she was a witch or not. That's all I want to know."

Another pause. Then, "What your mother was . . . Oh, she was so much more than

just a witch. Your heritage is something that . . . that I can't explain to you this way. It's very, very complicated."

I cover my mouth to stop a sob from coming out. I can't believe this. Why didn't she tell me? Why didn't anyone tell me?

"Come home," she says. "We'll talk it all over first thing in the morning. I promise."

My whole body goes numb. I don't know what I'm going to do with this confirmation. I sniffle and wipe my eyes again.

"Nana, I need to find out what happened to her," I tell her. "I promise when I find that out, I'll be home as soon as I can. We can talk then. I swear."

"All right," she says softly. "Be careful, honey."

I bid her good night, then hang up, sitting numb on my bed.

So. I'm a witch.

What does that mean?

The worst thing about it is that I don't have anyone to ask here. I'm in a den of wolves.

I lay down on my bed and look up at the ceiling. What had Cole called it? Magical supernaturals? Was that what I was?

The library would have information . . . right?

I'll start in the library, but I have to be careful. Cole did say there are too many eyes

here.

I slide into a fitful slumber, and my nightmare settles on me like a cold mist.

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:34 am

Something's wrong. Yarra isn't here. This is the third Labors class for the day, and I've seen no sign of her. Her scent's very distant. I think it might be connected to her nocturnal visits outside Moonhelm.

Ignoring her strange behavior, I still feel like her Alpha. And being her Alpha, I can sense her movements. With my wolf being as out of control as it is, I've gotten woken up in the middle of the night more than once from her midnight trips off campus. More out of curiosity than being compelled (since my wolf is on an ever-lengthening leash), I've followed her and seen her meet with a human man the previous night and a night or two before that.

I don't know who this man is, but my wolf was straining against its cage to jump on the car from the shadows and tear him apart. Who is he? And more importantly, what are they doing together, alone at night?

"Someone is missing."

I look up, pulled from my thoughts. My mother scans her students with furrowed brows, her eyes looking at each face individually.

"Yarra is sick."

All eyes turn to me, including my mother's. Her eyebrows are raised in surprise and . . . Well, I share the sentiment. I'd said it without thinking.

"Okay," she says, narrowing her eyes slightly. She doesn't buy it, but I doubt she'll challenge me. At least not in class. We were definitely going to talk about it later.

I glance over and see the Scarlet smirking at me like she knows something I don't. Fucking Scarlet. I don't like it that Yarra has seemed to befriend her. Hasn't anyone told her how dangerous and untrustworthy Scarlets are? She must have been raised under a rock.

I'm going to have to keep an eye on her. Yarra cavorting with a Scarlet Wolf won't do. I won't have her hurt by someone like that.

Class ends, and I decide to go looking for Yarra. Mother doesn't give me too much of a hard time as I leave with only a few words of goodbye to her. Good. I don't need her on my case right now.

As I walk through the halls, I lift my nose to pick up her scent. It takes me a minute, but I start to register it somewhere outside of this building. I follow her scent across campus, walking past the dorms and most of the other buildings until I spot the Spyril building, the first and oldest Moonhelm library.

She's studying, perhaps? I guess that's not so strange, but it's in the middle of the day. Who studies instead of going to class?

Unless she's meeting someone there. The human she meets up with at night, perhaps? No, it would be too risky for a human to meet her here.

Then why? I bound up the stone stairs and toward the doors. I walk in, and the musty air hits me. The old smell of parchment and ink that used to fill my nights. I walk past towering shelves that stretch up to the ceiling, thousands of books on them detailing so much of our world. Not all of it, though. I've heard of libraries in Clarion that put this one to shame with their catalogues.

There doesn't appear to be anyone here, but again, it's midday. Most of the students are in class right now. I walk along the aisles, tracking Yarra's scent as it carries over

the smell of books.

I make my way through the labyrinthine aisles, each turn revealing another view of sprawling collections. I finally spot her tucked away in a secluded corner, her eyes scanning the pages of an ancient-looking tome.

I'm tempted to step away. I feel like I've stepped into a moment in time. Some private thing that I'm viewing from afar, like in a painting. The amber light from a window above her shines down on her amethyst hair and warms up her soft skin, making it glow.

If I stand here much longer, she'll notice me. And now I'm thinking that maybe she shouldn't. I turn to leave.

"Chad?"

I stop. Too late. I turn back around to see her looking up at me, the space between her eyes creased with mild confusion.

"Yarra," I say. "There you are. I didn't see you in class today."

"I skipped," she says, closing the book in her lap. "You came looking for me?"

Now I know why I felt like this was an intrusion. It sort of is. We haven't even spoken since the night we were together. I must look like a creep to her right now.

"No," I say with a slight chuckle. "Of course not. My mother sent me here to find a book for her next class. It's funny that you're here. Most people don't study until after their classes are done."

"I'm not most people."

“So I’m learning,” I say with a smile. “It’s not like I didn’t know you were in here, though . . . or that you tend to take midnight walks from time to time.”

I know I’m pushing the limit here, but I have to know what that’s about. She gives me a slight sidelong glance, then says, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

She’s gotta be kidding me. Where did this woman come from? “You really didn’t think anyone would notice? Not even me of all people?”

She blinks at me, and I see something behind her eyes. Fear and curiosity, like I’d just shown her a door that she’s been looking for, and now she’s afraid to open it.

“How did . . .” she stammers.

“Followed your scent.”

That fear shifts to disgust. “I don’t know what this whole business is with you smelling me, but it’s really creepy. You shouldn’t go around telling women things like that—”

“What are you doing, speaking to humans outside of Moonhelm?”

She stiffens. “It’s my personal business.”

“Hmm,” I say as I cross my arms. “You know, if the wrong person saw you cavorting with a human, it might get you kicked out of here.”

She shifts uncomfortably in her seat. “You gonna rat me out?”

“No. But I’d love to know what you’re really up to.”

She rolls her eyes. “It’s not anything illegal or even immoral or anything. I’m just . . . I’m searching for my mom. She’s been missing for about ten years.”

“I’m sorry for that, but I don’t understand what that has to do with anything.”

She sighs, her fingers drumming lightly on the book’s cover. “I just found out she was a student here. So, I enrolled hoping to find some answers. So far, all I keep finding are more questions.”

“Huh.” She’s not the only one. “And the man you meet at night is . . . ?”

“A detective. He’s been helping me out.” Her crystal blue eyes scan me briefly. “So, you’re not going to tell on me?”

“Why would I do that? Because my mother teaches here? You assume quite a bit for someone who’s only just met me.”

Her face softens a little, and I feel like I’m paving the way to some trust. I hope so.

“So, you’re looking for answers to your mother’s disappearance,” I say, “and so far, the clues have led you to the library? How does that work?”

She stands up, tucking the book under her arm. “That’s complicated. And personal. I’d rather not talk about it.”

“You can trust me, Yarra,” I say, getting a little tired of this game she keeps playing. “I’m your Alpha. I would never betray you.”

She scowls at me. “You’re my what? ”

“Your Alpha.” She just stares, brows furrowed and mouth upturned. I can’t tell if

she's confused or horrified. "Come on. Don't tell me you don't sense it. Or didn't pick up my scent."

"Your . . . your scent . . . ?" She steps back from me, her eyes widening slightly. "I . . . I don't know what you mean."

I tilt my head. Her heart is beating fast, like she's afraid all of a sudden. "Yarra, you understand what I am to you, don't you? Why we were drawn together that night? You know what it all means. We're the same. You're a wolf like me."

"No," she says, shaking her head. "I'm not a wolf. I'm a human."

My stomach drops as I realize it. It all makes sense now. How she acted in the Labor classes, her comment about my eyes after sex, how lost she seems here . . .

"Oh, wow. You don't know."

She clenches her jaw and stands stiffly before me, like her feet were suddenly rooted to the ground. Her heartbeat is loud in my ears.

Dear God. She really has no idea.

"I . . . I'm human," she insists. "I'm not like you or anyone here. I'm . . . I'm . . ."

Her breath starts to hitch. I close the gap between us as she drops the book, her breath shaky and irregular as I pull her into my arms. "It's okay," I say to her. "Come on, sit."

I guide her back to her chair, and I kneel down next to her. She seems to be catching her breath now. "I don't have a lycan," she says. "I can't be a werewolf. I mean, I can wear silver jewelry. The moon has no effect on me."

“Those are myths, things made up by those who once hunted us.”

She looks at me, her blue eyes narrowing. “How are you so sure what I am? Just by how I smell?”

“That and the fact that I can never be an Alpha to a human woman. Didn’t you wonder about the claw marks on your body the night we were together? Or how connected we seemed to be?”

She rubs her hips absently. “I just thought you needed to clip your nails. God, I’m so confused.” She goes silent, and I can see her mind is spinning behind her eyes. “Could you be an Alpha for something else?”

I raise an eyebrow. “Something else? Like what?”

“Oh, I don’t know. A jabberwocky or a fairy princess . . .” She pauses, then, “Or maybe a witch?”

I smile at her. “First of all, I have no idea what a jabberwocky is. And even if I did, the answer would be no for all three. Only wolves.”

“Are you sure?”

And then it hits me. Why she’s in the library. She must have sensed something different about herself. Maybe even about her attraction to me. “Is that why you’re here? To find out?”

That’s the wrong answer. She rolls her eyes and looks away from me. “Not everything’s about you.” She gets up and turns to me as I stand.

“You wouldn’t happen to have any idea how books are checked out here?” she asks.

“I didn’t see a librarian.”

I stand up and say, “Just leave with it. It’ll return here in about a week.”

She smirks at me. “You’re kidding.”

“Of course not.”

The cold fear on her face has melted away as she nods, glancing down at her book.

“All right. I’d better get going then.” She starts to leave.

“Yarra, wait. We should discuss this further. There’s so much that you need to know about your lycan and—”

“I’m only here to find out what happened to my mother,” she says stiffly. “That’s all. Once I get that straight, I’ll be out of your hair and away from this madhouse.”

My heart stings at her words. I stiffen, blocking the emotion from my mind. “You can’t just leave. I’m your Alpha. You are meant to be with me.”

She scoffs. “Don’t make me get a restraining order.” Without another word, she walks away. The wolf inside me growls, its restraints holding back its true rage.

She’s about as stubborn as I am. She needs to know who she truly is, especially since we are bound together. I don’t know how I’m going to convince her, but it seems that I have to do it. One way or another.

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:34 am

Seeing Chad at the library was really the last thing I needed. I see him every day, and now I find out that he's been following me around campus? And what's this business about him being my alpha ? I don't think I want to know what that's about.

I mean, sure, he smells really good, and yeah, sleeping with him that first night was kind of out of character for me. But there's no magic wolf bonding thing happening. That's ridiculous. I think I'd know by now if I was a werewolf.

At least, I think I would know. You would think I'd know whether or not I was a witch, too.

It makes me wonder how it is that I've been able to move around undetected, though. If Chad could tell by my scent that I wasn't human, then surely others picked that up, too, somehow.

Shit. It's funny how a conversation or two can change your whole world.

I get back to my dorm, and hardly anyone is here. Classes are still in session, so I know I'm good to just go back to my room. If anyone asks, I'll just tell them I'm sick—

“So, there you are. I was wondering what happened to you.”

I reach the top of the stairs, and the voice comes at me through the door to the student lounge. I turn to see Saffron's blood-red hair bouncing as she walks toward me, a bag of chips in her hand.

“Hey,” I say and start walking. She comes with me.

“You feeling all right? Missed you in class today.”

“Yeah, I’m a little under the weather—Hey!”

She snatches the book out from my arms and opens it, scanning the pages briefly. “What’s with the library book? Oh.” She closes it and looks at the title. “Ancient Clarion Creatures.” Her eyes darken angrily, the jovial look in them gone. “Nice. You know, you could have just asked me, Yarra.”

I blink twice. “Asked you what?”

“Oh, don’t act like you don’t know. I’m a Scarlet Wolf, so you wanted to refresh your memory about my kind, right? Jeez. I knew it was a mistake to come here. The second people find out, it’s always the same shit.”

“Whoa, whoa,” I tell her. “Hold on a second. I wasn’t looking up anything about you, Saffron. I swear. I’ve kind of got my own problems right now.”

“Oh, yeah? Like what?”

I glance around us. Jeez, she really had to pull this here. “Like . . . like the whole lycan thing, okay? The research is for me, all right?”

She narrows her eyes, and it occurs to me that she might pick up on the lie pretty quickly. Saffron’s really perceptive. “Uh-huh,” she says. “So, you’re not upset that I’m a Scarlet, then?”

“No. Why would I be?”

She pauses, the corners of her mouth turning a little like she might laugh. “You never heard that Scarlet Wolves are dirty thieves and liars? Nothing like that?”

“What? Why would anyone think that about you just because you have red . . . fur?”

She chuckles. “You are something else, you know that?” She hands me my book. “You on your way back to your room?”

“Yeah, as a matter of fact, I am. Hey, aren’t you supposed to be in class?”

The smile on Saffron’s face fades a little. “I decided to skip today. After yesterday, I ran into a little trouble with some of our classmates. You haven’t lived until you’ve been called a sneaky slag in public.”

“That’s shitty. I’m sorry.”

She shrugs. “People are assholes. What can you do?”

We walk the rest of the way to my room. Once there, Saffron makes herself at home, plopping down on my bed and leaning back like she’s been my roommate all along. I have the fleeting thought of asking her if she can smell me. Or if there’s anything about me that she senses is different than everyone else. Saffron doesn’t seem like the type to mince words. I think if she thought I was different, she’d say so.

“So, I had a dream about you last night, and it was a bad one.”

I’m the middle of putting the book away and arranging my papers on my desk, tidying up. I glance up at her and chuckle. “Interesting. Did it involve a certain werewolf who happens to be our First Labor professor’s son?”

“You make jokes,” she says, “but Scarlets don’t dream unless it’s of the future.”

I stop what I'm doing and look at her, trying to find the joke. "So, every night, it's just a swirl of darkness. Makes sense."

She sighs and sits up. "I'm being serious, Yarra. I saw this old lady, and she looked a lot like you. Her hair was silver-gray, and she was wearing this brown nightgown with a design around the neckline."

"A design?" Chills grab at my chest. "What design?"

"Flowers, I think? Little pink ones. Anyway, she was screaming your name. She was saying that you need to come home before the Red Moon. There was this thing in the shadows, lurking. I think it was coming for her."

We both go quiet. Then I laugh. This is a joke. Saffron and her dry sense of humor. "Wow. You almost got me there, Saffron. Next time, work harder on the punchline."

"Hey, this isn't a joke. I really did dream it, and I don't dream pretend shit. Does it mean anything to you?"

My stomach drops. I'm beginning to feel a little nauseous. "I think you just told me my Nana is in danger."

"In danger if you don't come home," she says softly. "Yarra . . . are you in trouble with somebody or something?"

I turn away from her, grabbing my cell phone. I need to call and make sure Nana's okay. The phone rings once, twice . . . Come on, Nana . . .

"Hello?"

I sigh and slump down in my desk chair. "Hey, Nana," I say. "How are you?"

“Oh, I’m fine. I was just about to fix lunch. Is everything okay there?”

I’ve never been happier to hear her voice. Still, she could still be in danger. “Nana, could you do me a favor?”

“Sure.”

“Could you be sure to lock your doors and stuff at night?”

She laughs. It’s a nice sound. “Oh, are you worried about me? You’ve got nothing to worry about. I’m fine.”

“I know. I just want you to take care of yourself.”

I motion to Saffron to leave me alone. She takes the cue and whispers, “See you in class tomorrow.”

I talk to Nana for a while, the sound of her voice appeasing my anxiety. After, I turn to my calendar. I don’t know when the “Red Moon” is, but I need to find out and fast.

“You said she’s a Scarlet?”

I’m sitting in Cole’s car again. After hearing about the dream, I texted him to meet up. He could give me the quick and dirty about the dream, I think. Maybe give me some clue as to what might be stalking my grandmother.

“Yeah,” I say. “Seems like it’s a big thing around Moonhelm? Like she’s some kind of pariah or something.”

He nods as he takes a final drag from his cigarette and flicks it out of the window. “Scarlets rank highest in most dangerous werewolves. They’re naturally adept at

stealth and can do a ton of things that regular wolves can't. They make great thieves, assassins, that sort of things like that. Most people tend to steer clear of them because of it."

I nod. "So this dream she had, I should take it seriously?"

"I would. They don't dream unless it's a message."

That's just what she said, too. I swallow hard. "And the, uh, Red Moon?" I ask him, "What's that all about?"

"Scarlet Wolf thing," he said. "Takes place in about a week, I think."

I look at him. "A week? Oh, Cole, I've gotta go back home."

He blinks as if he didn't expect my reaction. "Hey, don't worry about your Nana," he said. "I'll have a friend of mine look in on her, okay? Make sure she stays safe."

"You'd do that for me?"

He nods. "Yeah, of course."

"Thank you, Cole."

His eyes lock on mine, and his hand lands on my knee. I freeze for a second, unsure of what to think. "You're incredibly brave for doing all this," he says.

There's something very uncomfortable about the way he's looking at me . . . plus his hand on my knee. I clear my throat and pull away from him. "Thank you. I should be getting back."

“Yeah, yeah.” It’s dark in the car, but I can see his cheeks are a little red with embarrassment. “Uh, have a good night.”

I leave and walk like the wind away from the car, my heart racing. What in the actual fuck? I never thought Cole would make a pass at me! What is it with these guys? What happened to professionalism?

Fear gives way to fury as I realize that he really tried hitting on me. Now of all times when I’m worried about Nana. Gross.

I head back to the dorm, and when I get there, I notice that my door is unlocked. I walk in and find Saffron huddled up on the couch. She’s asleep and covering herself with one of my old throw blankets. I frown as I look at her. She clearly broke in here. I know I locked my door.

I start to think about what Cole said about her kind of wolf. How other wolves thought about her. It must be pretty shitty to be in that position and still want to get some kind of education. I walk over to her and gently nudge her awake. She opens her eyes blearily and says, “What time is it?”

“Late,” I tell her. “What are you doing here?”

“Couldn’t sleep. Some asshole keeps banging on my door every hour and running off. Guess the national sport of fuck with the Scarlet has begun.”

I sit down on the couch next to her. “Sucks being the only one not in on the joke,” I say to her.

“Tell me about it. Where were you, anyway? It’s well after midnight.”

I sigh and think carefully about what I want to say. I’ve been trying to deal with all of

this myself, and it seems like it's only getting more and more complicated. Maybe it's time I confided in somebody.

"If I tell you something about me, would you promise not tell anybody else?"

She snorted. "Like there's anybody to tell. Everybody hates me, remember?"

I smiled wanly. "I don't hate you."

"Which is a real wonder. I'll have to thank the keepers of whatever cave you were brought up in."

"Well, that's what I want to talk to you about. I think there's a reason why I don't know anything about Scarlets and maybe why I haven't changed to . . . to a wolf. The problem is that I don't know enough about this world to put it all together. I think maybe if I can do that, then . . . then everything else will fall into place."

She gives me a deep frown. "And that's a roundabout way of saying what exactly?"

I pull my knees up on the couch and turn to her. "It's kind of a long story."

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:34 am

“Do you know anything about the new student? Yarra Wilkins?”

Mother looks up at me from her papers, her glasses sitting on the edge of her nose. She tilts her head for a moment, then turns back to the pile in front of her. “Is that why you’re here so late in the night? To ask me about another student? Curious.”

I don’t mean to show my hand to her, but I’m beginning to feel desperate. The private sessions with Professor Julia were helping a little, but the totem’s power is steadily weakening. I woke up this evening hearing Yarra’s heartbeat and picking up her scent like wildfire. She was going to see her human detective again.

It occurred to me then that maybe if I stepped in and helped her find her mother, then maybe she’d stop stealing away to this strange human every other night.

“She interests me, all right?” I tell her. “I thought it would be prudent to find out some things about her.”

Mother chuckles and lifts her head. “What could I know about a student other than their grades in my class, which, by the way, she’s doing very poorly in. She hasn’t even connected with her lycan in any way.”

I don’t dare tell her about Yarra’s identity crisis. That feels like a deep betrayal, somehow. I throw myself on my sword instead. “Well, I was thinking that she may be a proper candidate to be my Luna.”

She stares at me blankly, and for a moment, I can’t tell if she can see through my ruse. Then her face splits into a smile, and she leans back in her chair. “So, she was

the one you ‘talked’ to, then?”

My face starts to get hot. “That’s beside the point, Mother. I just would like to know if she, perhaps, comes from a family of influence.”

“Okay,” she says. “So you want to know if she’s a legacy at Moonhelm?”

“That’s information that you would be able to access, yes?”

“It’s information anyone can access. It’s a matter of looking up the alumni.” She pauses, tapping her fingers on the desk thoughtfully. “But I’m sure you would like it quickly, so that’s why you’ve come here.”

I nod, and she looks me over. “You can feel the wolf more now, can’t you?”

“Yes. Especially in the Labors classes.”

Her eyebrows raise a little. “All right. I’ll do what I can.”

“Thank you.”

I turn to leave, and I hear her say, “If you’re restless tonight, you should find her. Your lycan will thank you for the good night’s sleep.”

I don’t respond. I just leave without another word.

The next morning, I skip classes, deciding to go for a walk instead. We’re a day or two away from the Red Moon Ball, an event that always held very little interest to me but was important just the same. There’s always at least one Scarlet Wolf in the student registry, and just like where there are Alphas, there are Lunas, Scarlets have their own romantic counterparts—neutrals. It was supposed to start off a weekend of

events dedicated to the whole Red Moon thing.

That, like just about everything else these days, makes me think of Yarra. I would expect her to be there with her friend. If the Scarlet happens to be the only female and there are a wealth of neutrals in attendance, she'll have a busy time fending them off.

I've never bothered to attend, but knowing that Yarra will be there has made me rethink that. Perhaps I can convince her to connect with me again. Maybe I can convince her of her true nature.

I stroll down the winding pathways, going nowhere in particular. My wolf feels like it's jogging next to me, hungry and alert, but settled for the moment. I still have some control over him. I don't know if it's the totem or the lessons, but it'll have to do for now.

I don't understand how Yarra, the wolf who doesn't know she's a wolf, could possibly be my Luna. I seem to feel only chaos when I'm around her, even with the totem's power keeping it bound.

My mate is supposed to be my peace, yet her very scent brings a whirlwind of emotions. I don't understand it.

A chilly wind sweeps around me, and I pull my jacket closed. It looks a little like rain. I should head back to my room. I turn and nearly run right into my mother, who is walking right behind me.

I jump back in surprise. "Jeez. You scared me."

She frowns with slight concern. "You didn't sense me?"

"I was . . . I was in my own head. What are you doing out here?"

She wrings her hands. “Chad, I need you to come with me. We need to talk.”

“Is this about Yarra?”

“Not here,” she says. “Come on.”

The stern look on her face is enough for me to comply without protesting further. We walk in silence, and she leads towards the woods just past the campus borders. We walk along the well-worn path winding through trees so dark they almost block out what little light is coming from the clouded skies above us. We walk along the path for a few minutes before she stops and looks around as though she’s checking to see if there is anyone watching. Then she reaches into her pocket and produces a smooth black stone. She holds it out in front of her and almost immediately the black stone turns gold with ethereal energy.

I watch with rapt attention as the scenery before us melts away revealing a large white church with a graveyard surrounded by an old rod iron fence. A million questions enter my mind as we continue down the path towards the church.

“What is this place?” I ask.

“Once upon a time,” she says, “a human town dwelled in these woods. By the time Moonhelm was being built, the town had long passed into obscurity. As I understand it, most of the structures had been reduced to rubble in some great fire more than a century ago. Nothing survived except this church. So, we decided to keep it and shroud it with magic.”

I want to ask her why they would do something like that, but as we walk up the porch steps to the front door, I believe I’m about to find out.

Mother opens the door with a push on the splintered wood. It creaks open, giving way

to darkness and the smell of dust and wood. Inside, we are immediately in an old sanctuary. Pews lined up on either side of us are in various degrees of disrepair – old torn and dirt covered upholstery and splintered, broken wood frames. It's hard to imagine anyone had ever come to worship here.

“The graveyard wasn't here when the school was built,” mother says as we move towards the altar. The wood was still oddly intact though a tarnished brass cross still sat on top. “We decided to use it just the same. Every founder is buried here...all the way from the school's genesis.”

She walks behind the altar and pulls the brass cross towards her. There's rumble under our feet as a door slides open on the floor next to her, revealing stairs leading down into a stone hallway.

“Finding Yarra's mother was fairly easy,” she says as we start down the stairs and into the dank smelling stone basement. “Her name is slightly different. Different enough not to alert anyone, but not so different that I know it can't be a coincidence.”

We come to a dead end. She touches one brick on the wall before us and pushes in. A door appears and slides to one side, revealing a secret hallway.

“Yarra's family name was shortened from Wilkinson,” she says as I follow her through the passage. We're now approaching walls are lined with dusty books and artifacts from Moonhelm's past.

“Do you plan to kill me and hide my body?” I say with a smirk. She throws me an unamused look.

“This is no time for jokes, Chad.”

We come to a small room, the air heavy with the scent of old parchment and the faint,

dank basement smell from the stone walls. In the center of the room stands a pedestal, and on it lies a thick leather-bound book. Mother walks to it and opens it.

“This,” she says, “is the history of Moonhelm’s founding pack. Most of them were either descended from or in direct lineage to the Alpha King.”

I blink. “The Alpha King? Leon?”

“Yes,” she says. “Within these pages are records of the royal lineage and all the noble families of Clarion. Important and historical events are recounted here.” She smiles a little as she turns the page. “It is priceless.”

I think back to our own family lineage. Our pack wasn’t royalty, at least not by blood. But many of us were nobles in some of the courts back in the ancient city of Clarion. “Is this place of your making?” I ask and she chuckles.

“No. This was here many, many centuries before me.” She turns the pages, showing me ancestry tables of various wolves. She stops on one that spans both pages and leads over to the next group of pages.

“This is the royal line,” she says, her finger stopping on the name of the former Alpha King, the one of my mother’s and grandmother’s generation. Below him is the current king Leon and his Luna.

“Here are the children of Alpha King Morn, Leon’s grandfather,” she says, turning the page. This isn’t new information. Our family being descended from nobles, we know the royal line well. Many of them went off to form other packs that rule other parts of Clarion.

And then I see it. “There are too many children here,” I say. “Alpha King Morn only had two children, Gemma and Alphonse. He didn’t have a third.”

Mother nods. Her finger lands on the name of the third child, Charon. “This is Yarra’s mother.”

I look at her, my mouth dropping open. “What?”

“Charon of Clarion. Her name, as it was originally known, lives in these pages alone. She was an illegitimate child of Alpha King Morn and a young witch in his household. When her mother was discovered to have birthed a child of King Morn, an Alpha sworn to a Luna . . . well, she was banished to the Outer Lands. Years went by, and the child returned to Clarion as an adult. The family never really acknowledged her as an heir, but they pledged to let her have all the benefits of nobility.”

I’m floored. By all of this. But the pieces are slowly starting to come together. “Yarra’s mother was a hybrid.”

She nodded. “Yes.”

“Wait. How can you know this? You said her surname was Wilkinson. How could you have made this connection?”

She picks up a block of pages, a sad look in her eye. She turns to another section with photos. Some of them are in black and white, others in color. They show wolves running through the woods, then the same wolves in human form gathered in robes that were colored in light blue with sigils representing their family crests on them.

“These wolves were a part of the Table,” she says. “They were the founding pack of Moonhelm. They are all mostly gone now.” She turns the pages slowly, and we look at all the pictures. Candid shots of them talking to one another, sitting around a large stone table with the Moonhelm sigil carved into them. In one of the photos, I spot a woman with red hair among them.

“A Scarlet?” I ask and Mother shakes her head.

“No. But interestingly enough, she had a Scarlet child, the result of an unfortunate assault one night on campus. She gave the child up for adoption. It was quite the scandal back then.”

I think briefly of the Scarlet in our midst and I wonder . . .

“And here is Yarra’s mother.” She turns to the next page. An old photograph of a wolf with dark fur. In the lighting, it almost looks purple, like Yarra’s hair. Next to her is a human man. They’re both sitting on a log, looking out on a lake. The photo looks like it’s been taken without them knowing.

“Who’s the human?”

Mother pauses, then replies, “Her lover.”

My eyes widen in shock. My mother continues, “Love is such a strange thing. It can make you choose paths that others fear to tread so much, that they would do anything to keep you from it. I don’t know the story of how she came to know this human. What I do know is that she loved him. At least enough to carry on with him in secret until this photo was discovered.”

A wolf-witch hybrid in love with a human. The wheels turn in my mind as Mother goes on.

“Even with her illegitimacy, Charon was expected to continue Morn’s bloodline in the hopes that her children would at least reap the benefits of being accepted into the royal line. I suppose being rejected by your own father leaves a certain taste in your mouth, though, and Charon as an adult was very much her own person in the end.”

“Let me guess,” I say softly. “The Table didn’t approve.”

“Of course not. Can you imagine the scandal if anyone found out that Charon of Clarion preferred to keep company with a human?” She shakes her head sadly. “It was an unfortunate story, one that . . . that I imagine couldn’t be avoided in the end. Charon followed her nature, and the Table followed theirs.” She goes silent for a moment, a deep frown on her face. “You see, my son, when the Table saw a problem, they eliminated it.”

My stomach twists inside me. “Are you saying she’s dead?”

She closes the book. “The Table knew of her affair with the human and, at first, did nothing. They understood Charon’s wild nature and trusted that when the time came, she would discard her lover and move forward with an Alpha. But then, Charon found herself pregnant. She knew that if the Table found out about the child . . .”

She trails off. I’m glad she doesn’t finish the sentence. I don’t think I want to know.

“She changed her name from Charon of Clarion to Karen Wilkinson,” she says, “and stole away to the Outer Lands, using her magic to shield her from detection. And it’s been that way for years.”

I take everything in for a moment, a strange sense of danger coming over me. “The Table doesn’t exist anymore, so there’s no one looking for her now.”

“I never said that,” she said. “I only said most of them are gone.”

“What does that mean? Is Yarra in danger?”

She regards me, her eyebrows turned up with worry. “I wish I could tell you to forget this girl,” she says. “If any of this gets out about her . . . her connection to Charon . . .

It's already not safe for her to be here. You put your own life in danger being around her."

"I think it may be too late for that, Mother." The wolf inside me is roused, hairs standing on end. There's no use hiding any of my feelings now. "She is my Luna, and I must protect her."

Mother just looks at me, the saddest look on her face. "She is a Threefold," she says softly. "Human, lycan, and witch. The poor girl probably has no idea what kind of power she may have access to. She is better off never knowing. She is . . . safer that way."

"Until the right person finds out." The totem is doing very little to calm my wolf. All I want to do is run out of here and track Yarra down.

"Whatever you do," Mother says, "please be careful. There may be forces looking for her already."

I think about the Scarlet that hangs around her, the human in the car that she meets with . . . and those are just the ones I know about. Who else could be out there?

"I will." I kiss my mother on the forehead. "I promise."

With that, I turn and leave, on the hunt for Yarra.

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:34 am

I spent the last couple of days in the library scouring old registries for information about the alumni. Not a single listing with my mother's name.

I looked in old yearbooks and through news articles (which were pretty strange in it of themselves) and nothing. As far as I could see, there's no indication that she was ever here.

I was also avoiding Chad whenever possible. I've been skipping classes, and I couldn't help but think he'll come looking for me eventually. I tried to catch his scent in case he comes around—a scent that somehow isn't his cologne. That's a trip. I can't believe he just naturally smells that good.

With everything that's been going on, I started losing track of time. Saffron came by my room earlier wearing a satiny red dress with spaghetti straps, her blood-red hair up in an array of curls to display her long, elegant neck.

I'd forgotten. I promised I would go to the Red Moon Ball with her.

So. Here I am, my right hand tucked in Saffron's arm as we walk through the doors of the grand ballroom on the south side of campus. With everything that she's been through since she came out as a Scarlet Wolf, I would have thought she'd want to skip a party. Apparently not.

“So, tell me again why you wanted to come to this thing?” I ask her after we get our complimentary Red Moon pins. I look down at mine skeptically. Little metal moons painted red. Charming.

“Because it’s a ball for the Scarlet Wolves and their neutrals. That’s why.”

I frown a little. She’d explained about neutrals before and how they were the only ones who could handle mating with her. I don’t ask her to elaborate. I feel like I can live without knowing the details of something like that.

“So, everybody here is a Scarlet?”

She glances around, and her smile drops a little. “No, not everybody. A lot of Plain Janes in the house, no offense.”

“None . . . taken?”

The dance floor is filled with the kinetic movement of party guests, all dancing to the beat of the DJ booth at one end of the room. Strobe lights and a disco ball, people walking by with red cups in their hands . . .

It all looks like fun, but I’m just not into this right now. My mind’s back in the library.

“Come on,” Saffron yells over the music. “I’ll go get us some drinks!”

Before I can protest, Saffron’s disappeared into the crowd. I sigh and look around me, feeling like a lost boat in the middle of a sea of college students.

I turn around to get away from all the people, spotting a quiet corner at one end of the room. I weave through the crowd and lean against the wall, just happy to be out of the way. Shit. I kind of want that drink now.

“Hey, baby girl.”

I nearly jump as I realize I'm standing next to a guy wearing ripped jeans and a tank top. He's got acne scars and a pierced eyebrow . . . and he reeks of alcohol.

I cringe and take a step away from him. He's not deterred. He leans into me and says, "I've had my eyes on you for a while now. First Labor, right?"

"Yeah," I say. "Listen, my boyfriend is going to be back really soon. He wouldn't be too cool with you here."

He scowls. "Boyfriend? What are you, raised by humans or something? You trying to tell me you're mated already?"

"Yeah," I lie. "Totally."

He looks me over, his eyes moving over my dress and short sleeves like he's feeling me up. "I don't see no Mark. You look single to me, baby."

He grabs my arm, and I pull away. Quick as a wink, he grabs the other one and pulls me to his face, his beer breath assaulting my nose. "Hey, I like it when they fight—"

He stiffens, his eyes bulging. He starts gagging as he releases me. I stumble back to see that Chad is standing behind him, his hand around the creep's neck.

"Bad dog," he says. "When a girl says back off, you back off. Got it?"

He coughs loudly, then croaks, "She ain't marked. She's free game."

"Is that a challenge, friend?"

Chad's lips turn up into a snarl as he leans into him. The poor idiot just shakes his head as best as he can with Chad's hand holding him.

“I didn’t think so. Beat it before I lose my temper.”

Chad lets him go, tossing him away from me. The guy stumbles back, rubbing his neck sorely, then walks away from us. I look at Chad, who seems about as out of place as I am at this party. Everyone else is in party clothes, short skirts and dresses and tank tops and jeans. He’s wearing a dark dress shirt and slacks.

I hate to admit it, but I’m as relieved as I am angry to see him.

“Tracking me again?” I say to him. “You really shouldn’t stalk women. It’s a bad look.”

“Come on. We need to talk.”

He looks serious. More so than usual. He takes me by the hand and leads me to a nearby door leading to a closed off room. He flips on the light of a sort of lounge area. There are antique looking couches with red crushed-velvet upholstery around a table with a marble top and clawed metal feet. The walls are covered in an intricately patterned wallpaper. This whole place is like a castle.

“You know, if you wanted to take me to this party, you could have just asked,” I tell him. “You really have a lot to learn about talking to women.”

He looks uneasy. No . . . I know he’s uneasy. My heart starts to pound a little faster just looking at him. “What’s wrong with you?”

He opens his mouth to speak, then shuts it. He turns away from me. “Shit,” he mutters.

I walk up to him and touch his shoulder. He bats me away. “Don’t. Please.”

Something inside me stirs. A rush of excitement washes over me in waves, moving over my skin like a caress. I reach out to him again, and the second I touch him the feeling returns. Like something is pulling me toward him.

It's that same feeling I had the night we had sex, right before I left. That need to be with him again. Only this time it's much, much stronger.

He moves away from me and says, "I don't know if I can hold myself back, so I'll try to make this quick. I've found out something . . . Fuck—"

He leans against the wall, pressing his head to it. "Stand down," he whispers. "Fuck . . . Stand down. "

Without thinking, I go to him. I wrap my arms around him, my hands landing on his chest. I press my face into his back, taking in his scent. Something is moving inside me, awakening.

And it's hungry.

"Please," he says, taking my hands in his. "You don't know what you're doing . . . to me . . ."

He turns and pulls me into him, his dark eyes simmering. My heart is leaping inside me as he lowers his lips down to me, kissing me deeply, his tongue mixing with mine. My hands move up his chest and into his thick hair as I bite his lip passionately.

I had forgotten how good he tasted before, and I can't help but whimper at the passion that's coming from him.

His hands move up my thighs, his fingers hooking into my panties. I grab his wrists,

stopping him. He's not leaving me with no clothes to walk home in this time.

I pull away from him and slip out of my panties, kicking them across the room. He grabs my waist and turns me around and starts to bend me over the arm of the couch. I slip out of his grasp.

"No," I tell him. "I want to see your face."

He pauses, watching me as I unzip my dress and let it fall to the floor. His eyes move over my naked body, and he smiles, a growl rumbling in his chest. He reaches out and grabs me, pulling me back into his embrace. I start unbuttoning his shirt, kissing his hard muscles as his skin becomes exposed to me. I get his shirt open and start unbuckling his pants as he takes his shirt off the rest of the way.

This is insane. I can't explain how or why this is happening. It's like my body is yearning for him. Like it's been dying of thirst all this time and now I'm faced with a wellspring. His pants off, his cock is rock hard in my hands as I kiss him again. His sharp teeth pull at my lips.

He grabs me by the ass and lifts me up, pressing my back against the wall. In one easy movement, he slides himself into me, the sweet sensation of his cock inside me forcing a gasp from my lips.

He thrusts hard and deep, my legs wrapping around him and my arms holding his head as he nuzzles into my neck. My gasps turn to moans, growing louder by the second.

"Oh, yes!" I cry out, my nails digging into his shoulders. He rumbles against me with a growl, and sharp teeth scrape against my shoulder.

My legs are starting to shake as my body is suddenly filled with a twist of pain and

pleasure. I look down to see my hands have changed, dark claws where my nails should be, drawing tendrils of blood as I pierce his skin.

Fear . . . lust . . . pain . . . passion, it's like nothing I've ever felt. Nothing I've ever known.

He's slowing down, pulling back. I can feel him drawing away from me. I squeeze my thighs around him. "Don't stop," I moan. "Chad . . . Don't stop."

"I can't," he growls. "Yarra . . . Oh, fuck, Yarra . . ."

My instincts are informing me now. This is more than want. More than need. More than everything.

I am his. He must claim me. It has to happen.

"Do it," I demand, my body on the verge of climax. "Claim me, Chad! Oh, God . . . Do it, now!"

He thrusts harder as his mouth returns to my shoulder. His teeth pierce my skin, and the sweet pain sends me through the roof. I come harder than I ever have. The vibration of his growls as he bites me, marks me, echoes through my entire body.

He releases me, pulling me off the wall as his warm tongue caresses my wound. He moves me to the couch and lays me down, lifting my legs onto his shoulders.

I can feel his heartbeat racing. I look up into his face . . . blood on his fangs, running down his lips, his eyes shining like gold. He's about to come. Oh, God, so am I . . .

We come together this time. He leans his head back, his moans turning into howls. The sound resonates within me, and I join him, arching my back as I dig my claws

into his arms.

This is everything. The moon, the stars, the sky, and heaven. Everything. As my body shakes against his, he kisses me. The taste of my blood on his lips ignites the beast within me.

I am his.

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:34 am

The party's still going on. I can hear the thump of the music on the other side of the door. We're lying on the couch, naked and sweating . . . and bleeding a little. If somebody should walk in right now . . .

I don't think I would care. Fuck them and fuck appearances.

My wolf is quiet, and I feel like a whole man. It's incredible what a drug she is. I've slept with plenty of women in my life. I've taken meditation and anger management classes, even worn this damn totem all week. Absolutely nothing has worked the way being with Yarra has.

My hand lingers on her arm, my fingers slowing dragging up her soft skin. She nuzzles into me, her hand resting on my chest. I can hear her heart beating, matching the pulse in her hand . . . and my own heart.

We are one, and it's all I've ever needed. I was a fool to ever doubt that.

"Chad?"

Her voice floats up to me, soft as a whisper. "Hmm?"

She pauses, and I think for a moment that she didn't hear my response. Then she asks, "Am I really a werewolf?"

Now I'm pausing. What can I say to her? Do I tell her all of it? Where would I even start?

I take a deep breath, ultimately, and I tell her, “I think so.”

She frowns against my chest, then lifts up her head and looks at me. “You think so? Yesterday, you were sure. What’s changed?”

She has to know. Looking at her sparkling blue eyes, how could I even dream of keeping this from her?

“When you told me you were looking for your mother,” I started, “I decided to do a little digging of my own.”

Yarra sits all the way up. Her eyes widen slightly as she looks away. Her heartbeat has sped up.

“Do you . . . want to know?” I ask her.

She stares off into nothing for a moment, then says, “I’ve been looking for her for so long, I . . .” She shakes her head, pushing away the thought. “Tell me what you found.”

It’s so much information, and she didn’t grow up in this world. She’s completely ignorant to our people’s centuries of history. I sit up and take her hand.

“To tell you about your mother,” I say softly, “I have to start a little further back, to the place where she was born. Where we all come from.”

“I’m listening.”

I tell her about Clarion and the Alpha King and his mistress and their bastard child. I tell her about how she returned and lived a noble’s life and eventually came to Moonhelm to join the Table. All the while, Yarra’s not looking at me. She’s looking

down at her hands, listening to my every word.

“Who . . . who is the woman?”

I stop. I can’t just blurt it out. She needs to hear the rest. I squeeze her hand and continue. I tell her about how she fell in love with a human man and became pregnant, and about the Table and how they didn’t approve of her relationship, and finally, how she had to run to keep herself and her baby safe. And when I’m done, my mouth is dry and my own heart is pounding. There’s nothing else left to tell.

“When she left,” I say softly, “She changed her name to Karen Wilkinson.”

I leave it there. I don’t know the details of her mother’s life after she left, and, I guess, I don’t have to know or explain it. I can see in Yarra’s eyes that she’s putting pieces of her life that have long been missing together. I let her process in silence. There’s no sound but the muffled thumping from the party beyond.

Finally, she smiles a little and says, “So . . . I’m a princess?”

“In a way,” I respond, “and not really. She was a bastard, after all.”

She nods. “And . . . she was a witch and a wolf. And my father . . . Wow.”

“Did you ever know your father?”

She shakes her head. “Mom never told me much about him. Said he left before I was born. I just took it for granted that they had a bad relationship. Oh, God. Did something happen to him?”

“I don’t know.”

She bites her lip thoughtfully. “Well . . . Cole told me that I was a witch, and you told me I was a werewolf. I said I was human. I never thought we’d all be right.”

I frown a little. “Cole?”

“The detective I told you about. Oh, wait until I tell him.”

She gets up and starts hunting for her clothes. A little bit of panic sparks within me. “Maybe you should hold off on telling him.”

Yarra gives me a strange look as she puts on her panties. “Why? He might be able to find more about Mom if he knew her real identity. He sure seems to know a lot about your . . . my people.” She pauses, her smile wavering a little. “Yeah, I guess they’re my people. God, why didn’t she ever tell me?”

“Yarra,” I stand up. “You shouldn’t tell anyone about your real identity. If your mother is still missing, it might mean that someone is still out there looking for her, too. Maybe the both of you.”

She blinks. Then her smile fades. “Chad . . . What are we going to do?”

“I don’t know yet.” I brush a strand of electric purple hair out of her eyes, my hand moving down her neck and to the bite on her shoulder. “But you are my Luna. I’m bound to keep you safe, and we will figure this out together. I swear it.”

Her smile returns and melts into a smirk. “Luna, huh? Is that like a girlfriend?”

“More than that. We’re bonded. You are mine and I—”

“Am yours,” she finishes. Her eyes flit up and around my face, seeing me with new eyes. “I’ve got a lot to learn about being a wolf . . . and a witch, I guess.”

I hold her in my arms, my nose pressing into the top of her head. I'm swimming in her love.

"Hey," she says, pulling away from me. "The Games are tomorrow, right?"

"Yes."

"My friend, Saffron, is going to be participating. We should go to cheer her on."

I bristle a little, and Yarra's smile falters. "What?"

"Your friend the Scarlet?"

She rolls her eyes. "Oh, don't start with that. She's a nice girl. And she's been really helping me adjust to this place. The least I can do is help cheer her on."

She steps away and walks over to her dress, which was lying crumpled by the couch. "Do you know anything about Scarlet Wolves, Yarra? They can't be trusted."

"I know all I need to know about my friend, Chad. That's all that matters. You can't blame her for the actions of an entire species."

She slips her dress over her head, and that spurs me to find my pants. I don't like it that she's friends with a Scarlet Wolf, especially with everything that I know now. But if I don't go with Yarra, she'll end up going on her own, and that's probably an even worse move than her befriending the Scarlet in the first place.

"All right," I tell her. "I'll come. She's your friend. Far be it from me to interfere."

"Thank you." She slips into her shoes as I zip up my pants. "Speaking of which, I guess I'd better see where Saffron got to. She's probably worried about me."

“Saffron is at a party full of horny neutrals. I’m sure she’s doing just fine.”

Yarra rolls her eyes as I finish getting dressed. Then the two of us, hand in hand, walk out of the room and back to the party.

The Games start right at moonrise. I had wanted to spend the day with Yarra, but she insisted that she needed to do some more research on her mother’s family. I’d told her that if she was planning on searching the history books for info on her mother, she probably won’t find anything, but Yarra said, “That’s all right. I want to find out about my great grandfather and his family.”

I don’t blame her. If I found out I was directly descended from royalty, I’d probably want to know everything I could too.

But now, we’re sitting in the bleachers set up just outside the forest for the first game of the night. A trail of sorts has been carved through the grass leading into the woods, and there is a large monitor hovering over the field that will show us the runners once they disappear from view.

It looks like the entire campus is here. That’s not too surprising. Those of us who don’t care about any other Scarlet activities usually come for the Games, at least. I remember my younger days when I lived for this. It was one of the few times I actually enjoyed being at Moonhelm, and now that I’m here watching everything start up, I can’t shake off the nostalgia.

There’s a collection of Scarlets standing at one end of the trail leading into the woods. All of them are naked except for the scarfs they have tied around their necks, each in a different color. Yarra nudges me and asks, “What do the colors mean? Is that like what country they’re from?”

“No. It’s what pack they’re from.”

She raises her eyebrows a little, then furrows them. “But everybody hates Scarlets. Why would they want to represent their packs?”

I shrug. “Nobody hates Scarlets during the Games.”

Saffron looks up at us and waves. Yarra practically jumps out of her seat to wave back. I just cross my arms. I’m also scanning the crowd for any strange behavior or anyone watching us. There’s a lot of people here, and a lot of things could happen.

At least Saffron’s down there. If she means Yarra any harm, she certainly can’t do anything right now.

“So, this is a race, right?” Yarra asks.

“It’s a hunt. At the starter’s pistol, the Scarlets will run into the woods and try to evade capture while following a trail. First ones back move on to the next round.”

She nods, then says, “Hope Saffron does well.”

I smile at her. “You know, they hold these kinds of games for everyone during other parts of the year. Maybe you should participate.”

“I haven’t even fully shifted yet,” she says. “I doubt I could do anything like this. Besides, I don’t really do forests.”

Dean Fowler stands up in the box seats near the front of the bleachers in a rare appearance. When I was a student, we usually didn’t see him outside of events, unless something terrible had happened or one of us was called to his office. It was often said that if you met him one-on-one, get ready to be expelled.

He looks almost exactly the same as he did when I attended. Tall and thin with silver

hair pulled back into a neat ponytail. He's wearing a finely tailored suit with a tie in the school colors. He looks at the crowd as they quiet down, and his angular features make him look even more like a bird than he did when I was a student.

"Welcome to the annual Red Moon Games!" he says. "As you know, Moonhelm celebrates all wolves under the banner of Clarion as our pledge to diversity. Today, we honor the Scarlet Wolves, a vital part of the Lycan pantheon." He looks down at the runners standing at the starting line and smiles. "You are, and always will be, of our blood. You honor your packs today with your participation."

The crowd applauds politely, and Yarra gives me a sidelong glance. "Awful enlightened of the Dean."

"It's all politics," I say. "He's a respected member of the community. A united front looks good for Moonhelm."

"That being said," Dean Fowler goes on, "good luck and good journey to all the runners. Let the games begin!"

The crowd explodes, ready for the Games to get going, finally. We watch as a teacher walks onto the track where the runners are.

"Runners!" he shouts from the starting line as he holds a starter pistol in the air. "Assume your positions!"

The crowd around us cheers loudly as the runners jog up to the line, some of them stretching before getting into position.

"Ready! Set!" The pistol goes off with a loud bang. The runners shift quickly, each wolf sprouting fur a different shade of red. The crowd goes wild around us as the runners disappear into the forest. The screen above comes to life, showing a split

screen following each wolf. Their names are printed at the top of their individual section. Yarra points to Saffron with delight. “There she is! Oh, look at her go.”

We watch as the wolves race along the trail, masked hunters in the background of the monitors. Every time someone spots a hunter, they shout for the wolf to look out, as if they can hear them. I look over at Yarra, and she’s at the edge of her seat, watching as wolf after wolf gets tagged.

Saffron seems to be doing well, though. She’s a cunning animal, I’ll give her that. She sniffs the wind and slips in and out of the shadows, creeping past the hunters with hardly a problem. It’s looking like she’s going to be in the top three.

The screen goes dark, suddenly. The roar of the crowd dies away as confusion sets in. Clearly there’s some kind of malfunction.

“Help! Somebody help us!”

Screams from the woods. One of the runners has changed back to human form and is sprinting madly back to the field. Naked and wild-eyed, he runs right into one of the teachers, who grabs him by the shoulders and starts talking to him.

“What’s happening?” Yarra asks.

“I don’t know.” I look around us, the energy in the crowd shifting quickly to panic as several teachers run down to the field and change to wolves, rushing into the forest after the other runners.

“Oh, God,” Yarra says. “Saffron . . .”

Dean Fowler joins the crowd of teachers surrounding the man who ran out of the forest. The man is frantically explaining, but I can’t make out his words. Something

terrible has happened.

Dean Fowler rushes back to the teacher's box and grabs the microphone. "Everyone. We need you all to return to your dorms immediately. Please leave the area in an orderly fashion." As he speaks, some of the other teachers walk toward the edges of the bleachers and start escorting students from their seats.

"Once you are in your dorms, do not leave. I repeat. Once you have reached your dorms, do not leave until you get the all-clear message from the teachers."

Yarra looks at me. "Saffron's still out there. I can't just leave her."

"We have to go. Something is very wrong—"

"I'm not leaving Saffron."

Yarra shut her eyes, and suddenly, I can hear the whispers of a mind-link occurring. I watch in wonder as she stands stock still, her eyes moving rapidly. Holy shit. She can mind-link without her lycan?

She opens her eyes and looks around, pointing to the edge of the forest. "There."

I follow her line of sight and see one of the teachers rushing out with Saffron in his arms. She's convulsing.

Yarra is already bounding down the bleachers. I follow, pushing past people just to keep up.

Yarra and I run across the field to the teacher and Saffron. He's kneeling next to her as she convulses, her eyes rolled up into her head.

“Saffron!” Yarra moves to grab her, but I hold her back. The teacher stands with his hands up.

“She’s all right,” the teacher says. “She’s having a vision. It’ll pass in a moment.”

We watch helplessly as Saffron’s body continues to jerk violently, her pale skin reddening around her neck and shoulders.

Finally, she’s stilled. The teacher kneels down and rolls her onto her side as she starts coughing into the dirt. Yarra kneels down with him, putting a hand on Saffron’s shoulder.

“Saffron? Are you okay? Talk to me.”

Saffron gasps and coughs one more time. Then, she pulls herself up in a sitting position and says, “We need to leave. Now.”

“What’s going on?”

The teacher helps her to her feet and says, “There’s something in the woods. You need to head back to your dorm.”

“I’ll take it from here,” I say and help Saffron steady herself. “Can you walk?”

Saffron nods. I take off my jacket and wrap it around her. “Let’s go.”

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:34 am

I can't even believe this is happening. Saffron, Chad, and I are all in the student lounge at the dorm. Saffron's wearing gray sweats, her red hair tied back from her sallow face. It's been a long night already.

When we got back to the dorm, there was already talk about what happened out there. When Saffron walked in, we were bombarded with questions. If Chad hadn't been there to tell everyone to back off, I think they might've torn us apart in their fervor.

Saffron got dressed and then started walking through the halls yelling, "Meeting in the lounge!"

And now here we are, stone quiet after she told us what happened. Something had snatched up the other runners.

"Are you sure?" one of the other students asks, a pale guy with black hair. "Couldn't they have been lost?"

"Hello?" says the girl sitting next to him. She was thin and blonde and cheerleader pretty. "Didn't you see the way Laurel ran out of there? Something's in those woods."

"You didn't get a good look at it?" I ask Saffron. She shakes her head.

"Shit," someone says over the fearful murmurs around us.

"We need to gather the Alphas," Saffron says. "Form a search party."

No one responds. Incredibly, they're all looking around at each other like she isn't talking to them. She scoffs and shakes her head.

"Okay, listen. I know there's no love lost between the Scarlets and . . . well, everyone else. But if there is something out there mean enough to kidnap us, what the hell makes you think they'll stop after taking Scarlets? No one is safe."

More silence. Then the blonde says, "We should really leave it up to the professors. I mean, they're fully realized wolves—"

"Fuck them!" she says. "Whatever is out there, I want to rip it limb from limb myself. And if I have to go out there alone to save all you cowards, then I guess that's what I'll have to do."

"You don't have to go alone," Chad says. Everyone's gaze turns to him. "I'll go with you. And any other Alphas in this dorm will as well. Right?"

His voice changed with that last sentence. It wasn't just stern, it was like a vibration. I have to admit, it's turning me on.

And it looks like it worked. Five other Alphas in the group stand up to volunteer. "Good," Chad says. "Back to your rooms. Change into dark clothing and be back here in fifteen minutes. The rest of you, stay in your rooms until the all-clear."

As the room starts to empty, I stand up and say, "I'm coming with you guys."

Both Chad and Saffron glare at me like I've lost my mind.

"No," Chad says. "You're not ready."

"Neither is Saffron. Or any of the Alphas. We're all first years. Let me help."

“This isn’t up for debate. You haven’t even fully changed yet. It’s too risky. Right, Saffron?”

Saffron doesn’t say anything. She’s wrinkling her nose and looking away from us. “Saffron?” Chad presses.

“Aw, fuck. You know, I was really hoping that just this once things wouldn’t work out like my vision.”

Me and Chad exchange glances. That’s right. She hasn’t told us about her vision.

“She’s gotta come, Chad,” she says with a resigned sigh.

“Give me a break,” Chad protested.

“Hey, I don’t make the rules. I saw it. It’s gonna happen. She’s coming with or without your permission. At least this way you can keep an eye on her.”

Chad grinds his teeth bitterly. “Fine. But you stay close to me when we’re out there.”

“Great. I’ll be right back.”

I rush off to get dressed, and right before I leave, I hear Chad mutter, “Fucking Scarlets . . .”

Fifteen minutes later, we’re sneaking out of the back door of the dorm and across the campus toward the woods. Saffron, the stealth expert she is, takes the lead. “Watch my every move,” she whispers before we venture out.

We get across campus by moving through the line of shadows around the buildings. Chad makes sure to have the others surround me with him right next to me. I’d never

say it out loud, but I feel safer already.

We get to the edge of the forest, and chills start to run up and down my spine. The memory of the eerie chapel is still fresh in my mind. Saffron turns to us and says, “Follow me closely. And we stay together. And Yarra? When I tell you to run, I’m not bullshitting. Get the fuck out of here. Got it?”

I nod and she nods back. “Okay, let’s go.”

We creep into the forest, taking careful steps over fallen branches and stepping lightly through dried leaves. The cool night air is fragrant with pine, and I swear I hear the soft sounds of animals in the woods.

I never could before. Interesting. I wonder if my powers are starting to manifest.

Saffron suddenly stops and turns her nose up to the air. She turns to the Alphas, her eyes glowing red in the darkness. “Spread out, but not too far.”

The other wolves do as they’re told, giving her some room as we continue to move forward. Chad stays close to me, his body heat welcome as the temperature drops around us.

“Feel that?” Saffron whispers. “We’re close.”

We move along a little further, and suddenly, I pick up a scent. It’s strong and . . . foul. Like burning sulfur. I put my hand to my nose as I look over at Chad and Saffron. They stop and exchange worried glances.

“What?” I whisper. Saffron nods her head to the side. I look and see there’s an old cabin that I swear wasn’t there a minute ago. It sits in the dark, a heavy fog hanging over it.

“Dark magic,” Chad says.

“They’re in there,” Saffron says. “Wait here, Yarra.”

I start to protest, but she turns and glares at me, her eyes blazing like hot coals in the darkness. A chill of fear goes through me, and I back away. This must be the dangerous creature Chad tried to warn me about.

Saffron’s ember-red eyes turn to Chad. “You ready?”

“You better believe it.”

Without warning, Saffron leaps forward, changing into a wolf as she charges into the cabin. Chad’s right behind her. He shifts into a massive wolf that’s so dark it almost blends into the shadows. All the other wolves that came with us change as well, running for the cabin in a wave.

I’m terrified. I honestly don’t know what to do. It feels equally as dangerous to be here as it would be to go into the cabin.

I creep toward to the cabin. I figure it’s better to be in proximity to the other wolves than out in the open by myself. As I approach, I can sense the dark magic emanating from within. Growls, and snarls, things being toppled over—

Lightning flashes inside, illuminating everything for a split second. I see the silhouette of two people moving away and toward the back. Another flash and I hear the yelp of an injured wolf. I panic and run for the door.

I race inside to find all the werewolves, including Saffron, dangling in mid-air. They all look to be in mid-pounce, except Chad. Chad is lying on the floor among a pile of broken furniture.

And standing in the middle of it all are two figures. My stomach drops as I realize that one of them is Nana, cowering by the wall.

The other, standing with his hand outstretched, magically suspending all the wolves by some unseen force of magic . . . No. It can't be.

“Cole?”

His eyes flash toward me, focusing. They're glowing red, almost as red as his beard. The snarl that was on his face as he held up my friends has dropped. He clearly wasn't expecting me to be here.

A growl rumbles off to my left, and a black wolf leaps at him. Chad. Cole shifts his stance and waves his arms in a big arch. The air rises up and pushes us all back, sending us flying into the wall.

I hit the door, my head banging the wood so hard I see stars for a moment. I fall to the floor, the wind knocked out of me. I look up just in time to see Cole grab my Nana by the arm, then wave his arms again and disappear.

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:34 am

We're sitting on the steps of my dormitory, the full moon casting a silver glow on Chad's face. He's got a bruise at his hairline from when Cole attacked him. I look at it sorely, the guilt heavy in my chest.

Around us, the administrators and professors are all out trying to find out what happened. After Cole left the cabin, we found the missing runners, all bound to chairs, too weak to move. We carried them out of the forest just as a group of professors met us at the tree line leading back to campus. I guess somebody ratted us out.

Now come the reprimands. Dean Fowler and several of the professors are out here questioning all of us. The students have all been taken to the infirmary, and now they want to know what the hell we thought we were doing. Chad's mother is here, too, though I'm not sure why. She wasn't even at the game.

I can't stop thinking about seeing Cole . . . with Nana. I'm so worried about her. Why would he do this? What kind of sick game has he been playing with me all this time? I'm mentally questioning everything that he's said to me so far. I wonder if he ever really intended on helping me find my mother in the first place.

"You could have been killed," the dean says to all of us. He's been pacing back and forth since he got here, his long white hair flowing loose around his shoulders as he moves. He's wearing a robe and pajamas. No doubt, somebody had to wake him up when we came back.

"I don't know what possessed you to disobey a direct order to stay in your dorms, but I promise you there will be repercussions for this."

“Why?” Saffron speaks up. She’s standing next to the stairs, arms crossed and a scowl on her face. “We saved those students’ lives. You should be thanking us.”

“Thanking you? For putting yourself and five other wolves in danger? Anything could have happened to you out there.”

Saffron clenches her jaw as she glares at him, a mix of anger and worry on her face. “What about the witch in the woods? What are you going to do about that?”

“Are you sure it was a witch?” Chad’s mother asks. The dean throws her a look of annoyance. She says to him, “We should get as much information as we can about it, Dean Fowler. If there is a witch, here, we could all be in great danger.”

He doesn’t say anything in response to her, but both of them turn to Saffron.

“It was a witch . . . I think,” Saffron says.

“You think?” Dean Fowler leans toward her in a hostile posture. She straightens her back, her feet rooted to the ground.

“Yeah, I think . I mean, he picked us up and tossed us around the room with magic, but—” She stops, her eyes flitting between the both of them.

“But what?”

She swallowed, then continues, “But it could have been a Shaman or a . . . a mage, for all we knew. It all happened so fast.”

“Mages are healers who work strictly in service to the king, and the Shamans are at peace with the packs of Clarion,” Dean Fowler says. “Neither would dare destroy their political standing with the Alpha King and his subjects by attacking

Moonhelm.”

“Well, you never know—”

“And even if they did, we would not be dealing with only one of them. If you studied your history better, you might know that, Scarlet .”

He throws the word at her like a rock. Saffron flinches, her eyes widening. She balls her fists, and I can almost feel the air around us heating up.

“Dean Fowler,” Chad says, standing up and getting between them, “I think that things are getting a little heated. Maybe we should retire for the evening and sort out the details once heads have cooled. It might be conducive to find out more information about whatever that is in the woods, don’t you think?”

Dean Fowler is still clearly hot with anger, but as he looks at Chad, it seems like he’s cooling off.

“He’s right,” Chad’s mother says. “Arguing right now isn’t productive. We should let these students rest and revisit this in the morning.”

The dean looks at both of them, then throws up his arms. “Fine. But this isn’t over. You will all answer for your insubordination tonight. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, sir,” Saffron says through clenched teeth.

He throws her a final glare, then walks away, the other professors following him. Chad’s mother turns to him and says, “Escort them back to the dorm, then come see me in my office.”

“Can’t this wait until morning?”

“No, it can’t.” She says it in a hushed, stern tone that reminds me somehow of when Nana wants to talk to me about something serious. I have no doubt that Chad will be talking to her tonight.

She turns and joins the other professors. I stand up and put my hand on Saffron’s shoulder. “We did the right thing tonight,” I tell her. “You know that, right?”

“Yeah,” she says, her eyes following Dean Fowler. “I know it.”

The other Alphas start to meander toward the dorm. One of them says to us, “We should get back inside.”

“I’ll walk them to their rooms,” Chad speaks up. The others walk away, and Chad charges right up to Saffron, getting in her face.

“What do you know?”

She blinks in surprise. “What the hell are you talking abo—”

“What were you holding back from the dean, Saffron?”

“Hey,” I say, “What are you doing, Chad?”

“I asked your friend a question. You said you thought it was a witch, but you weren’t sure. Why aren’t you sure?”

She scowls at him, her nose wrinkling in anger. “You got a hearing problem or something? I already answered this question.”

“And Dean Fowler didn’t believe you.”

“Because I’m a fucking Scarlet, genius! Everybody always thinks I’m lying!”

“Hey!” I wedge myself between them. “Enough! She told him everything that she knew. Why are you pressing the issue?”

“Because she knows more than she’s saying, Yarra. This was in her vision, remember? She’s keeping something close to her chest, which is bullshit. Students have been hurt, and she’s not telling us what we need to know.”

“Stop it!” I shout at him. “For Christ’s sake, this has got to stop! Saffron can’t help it that she’s different! Why do you keep treating her like shit?”

His face goes blank, the anger gone in a flash. “Yarra—”

“Calling her Scarlet like it’s a bad word, telling me she comes from assassins and thieves. She’s been nothing but helpful to me and to the rest of us, and people like you keep treating her like . . . like she’s dirt! Well, it stops now. You hear me, Chad? It stops now! ”

He just stares at me blankly, his mouth slightly agape. He looks over my shoulder at Saffron, then back to me. He takes a breath.

“She’s holding something back from us, Yarra,” he says.

“Well, if she is, then it’s your own damn fault. You and the rest of you racists .”

“Racists? We’re the same species—”

“Then act like it! Come on, Saffron.”

I take her by the hand and lead her up the stairs to the dormitory doors.

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:34 am

Meet me in the infirmary. —Mother

I'm looking at the note on my door, and I'm half inclined to ignore it. I need to talk to Yarra.

I could have gone about the conversation better, I think. But the moment I realized that Saffron's pause meant something, I had to jump on it. She knows something about the man in the forest.

I realize something, too. If I'm not mistaken, he's the same person that Yarra was meeting up with. I knew there was something off about that entire thing.

But now I know there's a bigger plot forming, and not only is Yarra in danger, but we all might be. I need to put the pieces together and quickly.

I turn the note around in my hand for a moment. The infirmary is on the way to Yarra's dorm. Whatever Mother has to say, I imagine that it won't wait. I should go see what she wants first.

I get dressed quickly and start making my way across campus. It's a ghost town out here. With everything that's happened, I'm sure classes are canceled until further notice.

My wolf starts to pace again. I'm yearning to be in Yarra's presence. Whatever happens today, I'll need to make amends with her. I can't be without her.

I get to the infirmary, and I immediately see Mother talking to one of the nurses

behind the front desk. She sees me and excuses herself, walking over to me.

“Thank you for coming,” she says.

“What’s all this about?”

She’s got a long expression, and her skin has a sallow tone to it. She looks like she hasn’t slept all night.

“Come on,” she says, leading me into the next hallway. “There’s something you need to see.”

We walk into the main room of the infirmary. Rows and rows of hospital beds line the plain white walls and pale linoleum tile. A couple of nurses are examining the occupants of the beds, the runners from the Games.

They all look terrible. Gray-pale skin with lips tinted blue. Most of them are unconscious, and the couple that aren’t look like they’re in a great deal of pain.

“How are they?” I ask Mother.

“Not good. Not good at all.” She turns to me and says, “They can’t seem to access their lycans or any of their powers. They’ve been drained.”

“Drained? How is that possible?”

She pauses, looking back at them sadly. “It’s high magic. Something that even eludes many of the most powerful magic users. And yet, it comes naturally to one particular type of wolf.”

I frown at her, trying to understand her meaning. My mind goes immediately to

Yarra. With her being a hybrid, she must be thinking of her. “If you think Yarra did this somehow—”

“No,” she says, nodding her head. “I don’t believe she did this . . . Her friend, on the other hand.”

My frown has turned into a scowl. “Saffron? You’re joking.”

“I’m not,” she says.

“Saffron might be a Scarlet, but she’s still just a wolf. They aren’t magic users.”

She looks over her shoulder at the nurses, then takes me by the arm and pulls me aside. “There is much that you don’t know about the Scarlets, Chad. There are things about them that are privy only to certain people—”

“Like the Table?” I ask. “Is this something that your secret organization came up with?” I’m starting to fume, my wolf growling like a hum in my chest.

“Yes!” Mother hisses. “Chad, there have been stories over the centuries. Stories of Scarlets eliminating their enemies by draining them of their powers . . . and using that energy to fuel their own powers. Whoever did this . . . we believe they are a Scarlet Wolf.”

A cold realization comes over me as the pieces start putting themselves together in my mind. Saffron’s hesitation with the dean . . . Shit. I knew they didn’t buy it any more than I did. And now . . .

“Mother, Saffron didn’t do this,” I say to her. “We told you that we were attacked by someone else. That’s the truth.”

“Honey, you were knocked out in the battle. There’s no way to be certain of what you saw.”

“I saw who knocked me out,” I say, raising my voice. She reaches out to me, and I pull away. “No, this is bullshit. You—”

Oh, God. I almost missed it. Her words come around to me like a slap on the back of the head. “We believe?”

“What?”

“You said ‘we’ believe the kidnapper was a Scarlet. Who’s we?”

She swallows and takes my hand between hers, radiating warmth and comfort in the face of my growing anger. “We’re just going to ask her some questions about what happened. That’s all.”

I pull away from her, my anger giving way to fear. It all makes sense suddenly. How could Mother know about the Table when no one else does? She knew where to find their archive, knew their history . . .

She’s one of them. She’s a member of the Table. How could I have been so blind?

I run out of the infirmary, bound for Yarra’s dorm. Saffron . . . Yarra . . . They’re both in danger. I have to warn them.

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:34 am

I didn't sleep all night. I stand under the warm water of my shower, letting it run over my hair and my body in soft, massaging waves. I'm going to go check on Saffron this morning. Last night was . . . a lot.

Chad coming after her was uncalled for, and it's made me rethink a lot of things. This new world that I've been introduced to might be different from mine, but I would think that common decency would still exist. He's clearly not the man I thought he was.

Or wolf. Dammit. That part of this is the hardest. I can feel him even though he's not here. And I bet if I turn my nose to the air outside, I can pick up his scent. I might not have been able to commune with my lycan, but it seems like it's there, nonetheless.

When I close my eyes, thoughts of him invade my brain. The warm feel of his hands on my body almost seems real. The water sends a sweet sting through my body when it hits the rapidly healing wound on my shoulder and the scratches on my hips and ass, reminding me of his ability to penetrate me in more ways than one. Fuck, how can I feel like this when he was such an asshole?

I get out of the shower and start getting dressed, still with Chad on my mind. He said that we were fated to be together. Is that what this feeling is? Am I supposed to want to be with him even when he's being a complete jerk? Jeez, what a rip-off.

I set that thought aside as I pull on a pair of jeans and an old t-shirt, then put my hair up into two braids to keep it out of my face. I hope Saffron's up by now.

I make my way to her room. No one's out and about right now, but I do hear voices

talking and music coming from some of the dorm rooms. It's almost like a normal day, except there's a crazy sorcerer in the woods, who also happens to be Cole. God, I'm such an idiot for not seeing that sooner.

I knock on Saffron's door, and a few seconds later, she opens it. She's dressed, but her long red hair is damp. She looks me over and smiles a little as she runs a brush over her hair.

"Hey," she says, letting me in.

"Hey. Are you okay?"

She chuckles. "I'm great. Just waiting around for my sentence like a good little prisoner."

I sigh as she sits down at her desk, putting down the brush and picking up a hair tie. "Last night was rough," I say. "I'm sorry Chad tore into you like that. He was really out of line."

Her brow furrows a little. She doesn't say anything to that. She just puts up her hair.

"You want to hear something fucked?" I tell her as I sit down. "The guy in the woods? I know him."

She pauses then finishes tying her hair. "What do you mean you 'know him'?"

I can feel my face starting to flush. Embarrassment. I can't believe that's the emotion I'm feeling right now. "His name is Cole. He was supposed to be helping me find my mom."

Her frown deepens. "So what you're telling me, Yarra, is that you know that son of a

bitch, and you didn't tell anyone?"

"I didn't know he was a . . . whatever he is. God, it's such a long story." I run my hand over my hair for a moment. I don't know how to tell it all. "He pretended to be a private detective. My mom's been missing for ten years, and I found out she went here, and—" I take a deep breath. There's so much to say.

Saffron looks away for a moment, then barks a short laugh. "You know, I had a foster mom tell me once that having all the information will always put you ahead of the game. It's so ironic that I'm only just now getting that."

I tilt my head, and her smile fades a little. "I was hiding something from the dean," she says. "So don't be mad at Chad. He was too perceptive, and I had to lie on the spot, and I really suck at lying when I've only got a split second to prepare."

My heart thumps hard against my chest. "What are you hiding?"

"Your friend? The magic detective? He's something other than a magic user."

"What? How could you know—"

"Because he smells like a Scarlet," she says. "I know there's no way he can be, but I know Red Blood when I smell it."

"You can smell it? Why can't anyone else?"

She shrugs. "Must be a part of our whole stealth thing, maybe? Scarlets can sniff out other Scarlets."

I sit in silence, the wheels turning in my brain. "So, then, Scarlet wolves can do magic?"

“Not as far as I know, but . . . maybe? Not a lot is known about Scarlets. Mostly because nobody cares to find out. Nobody even knows how we’re born. Most people think we’re some kind of genetic mutation.”

My stomach lurches, and I bite my lip. I don’t want to ask, but I have to. “Could he be a hybrid?”

“I’ve never known a Scarlet to be a hybrid, but I guess anything is possible.”

I’m floored. One more piece to a puzzle that I feel like I’m close to solving. Although there are so many pieces still yet to be found.

“Also,” she says with a deep sigh, “This guy? He’s going to kill Chad . . . unless the silver wolf comes.”

I don’t say anything for a moment, absorbing the shock of that news. Finally, my mind switches to problem-solving mode and I ask, “What silver wolf?”

She shrugs. “All I know is that, unless it shows up, he’s dead.”

“What the hell does that even mean! Maybe the dean will come and save him? He’s got silver hair. Maybe his fur is silver, too?”

A knock at the door interrupts the conversation. Saffron gets up to answer it, saying, “Whatever that guy is, he needs to be stopped before . . . Oh.”

She opens the door, and Chad’s on the other side. He pushes past her and comes in, looking around the room like he’s expecting someone to be in here.

“Hey!” Saffron yells. “What’s your problem?”

“Sorry,” he says shortly. “We need to leave. Now.”

Saffron and I exchange a quick glance. “Why?” I ask. “What’s going on?”

“I’ll explain on the way back to my place. You’re both in danger.”

I stand up, and Saffron’s face slides into a scowl. “Wait. What’s going on?”

“No time. Let’s go.”

We start to leave, but Saffron stops suddenly. I turn to urge her on, but she’s stiff as a board, her arms at her side and her knees locked straight. She looks at us, terror in her eyes.

“Saffron?!”

Her eyes go white, and the expression on her face changes. She’s smiling darkly at us.

“Hello, Chad...Yarra.”

Her voice isn’t hers. I recognize it immediately. “Oh, my God. It’s Cole.”

“Bingo,” he says through Saffron’s voice. She turns her eyes to Chad. “I have a message from Dean Fowler . . . and your mother. It’s time to come to the Table. We have some . . . family business to discuss.”

My heart is pumping ice-cold blood through my veins. Chad’s reaction is the direct opposite, and I can feel an animal rage coming off him in waves. “Let her go, you monster!”

“Come to the Table.” Saffron’s eyes roll back to me, her white gaze staring holes through my body. “Your little doggy knows the way.”

Saffron’s eyes flutter shut, and her body relaxes. She stumbles forward but catches herself before she falls. “What the hell happened?”

Chad shakes his head. “He has Mother . . . and the dean. I’ve gotta help them.”

He goes to leave, but I grab his arm. “I’m coming with you.”

“No.”

“He has my Nana, too, Chad. I am coming with you.” I raise my voice, and a vibration rushes through me. What was that?

Chad regards me for a moment, then says, “Saffron, you might as well come, too, then.”

“Like that was a question.” She rushed over to the door and grabbed her jacket off the hook. “Let’s go.”

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:34 am

I wish I knew how all of this got so out of control so fast. This Cole asshole has turned everything upside down, and we don't even know why.

I run through it all in my mind as we rush to the building that Mother took me to before, where the old archives are. I can't imagine what the motivation for doing this could be, but knowing my mother was captured, I can guess it has something to do with the Table.

Mother had said that if the Table found a problem, they "eliminated" it. I've been wondering about that since she said it. Yarra's mother ran from them when she found out she was pregnant. A person only runs if they fear for their safety. What sins have the Table committed that brought all this onto us?

We walk through the woods along the path and it occurs to me that I don't exactly know how to get to the church where they are. Mother had used some sort of talisman. I start to slow down around the part of the path I think the magical barrier is and I turn to Yarra and Saffron to tell them, but I see Yarra is looking past me, eyes as large as saucers.

"Oh, God...The church from my dreams."

Saffron and I exchange a look, then I say to her, "You can see the church?"

"You can't?" She puts her hand to her forehead in dismay. "Oh, God, I am cracking up."

"I can't," I say. "You're part witch, so the magic surrounding the church won't affect

you.”

Yarra looks at me, then back at Saffron. She asks her, “Do you see it?”

Saffron shakes her head. “But I’m not really all that in tune with my magical side yet.”

“Okay.” Yarra sighs and looks back over my shoulder. “So, they’re inside this church?”

“I think so,” I say.

She nods, then steps forward. “Maybe I can guide you two in?”

I shrug and so does Saffron. “Sure.”

Yarra takes my hand, then grasps Saffron’s arm with her other hand. “Okay. Right this way.”

We walk, hand in arm in hand and before I know it, the magical veil dissolves around us and we’re standing before the large white church where mother took me before.

“Ha!” Saffron said happily. “It worked!”

“So, it did.” I look down at Yarra and see the utter fear in her eyes. She looks like she’s only seen horrors in this place before now. “Yarra, you don’t have to go any further. You can stay out here until it’s safe. Saffron and I are perfectly capable of handling this.”

She shakes her head. “No. He’s got Nana. I have to come.”

“All right.” I look over at Saffron. “Is he here?”

Saffron lifts her nose to the air, taking a long sniff. “He’s here, all right.”

We walk up to the door and Yarra stays close to me as we enter the church. I can hear her heartbeat beating hard and fast, her fears surrounding her. We traverse the stairs and the hallway to the opening where the hidden door should be. Looks like he left it open for us to follow. We all stop and look down the dimly lit hall and the bookshelves lining the walls.

“Looks like a trap to me,” Saffron says.

“I couldn’t agree more. But what choice do we have?”

“Stick to the shadows,” she says. “We don’t know if he’s watching.”

We enter the hall and step carefully, doing our best to stay out of sight. Saffron slips in and out of the darkness like it’s nothing, sidestepping shafts of light and blending in as if she wasn’t there at all. Must be nice to have such a gift.

Yarra is close to me, holding my hand as we walk. Her heart is pounding. She’s terrified. Can’t say as I blame her.

We reach the small musty room where Mother showed me the book with the Table’s history in it. The book’s gone.

I look around, thinking there has to be more to this area than just this room. There are no other doors, though. I see Yarra lifting the cover of an old painting, stuck between the bookcases, almost completely obscured. The painting is of a woman with long blonde hair and Yarra’s sweet smile and shining blue eyes. She’s wearing the administrative robes of the other founders.

“The missing painting,” she says softly.

I know there are a dozen questions in her mind and I would love to answer them all, but we had a Scarlet to find.

“Saffron,” I say. “Still smell him?”

“Yeah,” she says. “It’s strong too. Like he’s right in the room with us.”

I nod. There must be a hidden room somewhere. Maybe a button—

“You’re here.”

Cole’s voice is right behind me. I turn to see Saffron’s eyes are white again, the devious smile on her face. “Good,” he says through her.

Yarra’s face is twisted in distress. She steps back from Saffron, her hand gripping mine. “Where are you?” I ask.

“I’m here,” says Cole. “Step on the stone next to the podium.”

I turn and see a small stone sticking up next to the bottom of the stand the book was on. I step on, pressing it down into the floor.

The room starts to shake around us, vibrating like a small earthquake. The wall behind the bookstand slides to one side, revealing a large dimly lit room. Wood floors, stone walls, a large ancient bronze brazier hanging over a giant circular table with runes carved along the edge.

And sitting at the table, bound with rope to the chairs they sit on, is my mother, Dean Fowler, and an old woman I have to assume is Yarra’s Nana. They’ve all been

gagged, but the second Mother and Yarra's Nana see us, their eyes widen with terrible fear.

Standing in front of the chair facing us is Cole. He's leaning with both his palms on the table, his face split into a terrible smile, red hair falling into his eyes.

"Thank you for coming," he says. "Please. Join us."

We walk in. I can feel Yarra's fear as her eyes fix onto her grandmother. The old woman looks frail, her graying hair in a bun, with tendrils of flyaway strands sticking out all over.

Saffron walks ahead of us, her eyes still as white as milk. She walks around the table and sits across from the hostages, next to Cole.

"Chad," he says, tilting his head and sizing me up with his eyes. "Nice to finally meet you. I've heard so much about you, no thanks to your Luna. She seemed pretty intent on keeping you from me for some reason."

"Let them go," Yarra demands, her voice firm and angry.

"No," he responds, but he's still looking at me. I wonder if he can sense the wolf within me, coiled and ready to pounce.

"They haven't done anything to you," she says. "They're innocent. You can't just hold people hostage like this."

He doesn't say anything, but his smile slowly falls. "Oh, Yarra." He finally shifts his gaze to her. "Poor little pawn has no idea how she's been played."

"Maybe you can enlighten us," I speak up. I'm taking stock of the room and its size.

Looking around quickly for any exits.

“Saffron?” Yarra steps toward the table. “Saffron, wake up!”

“She can’t hear you. She’s mine now.” Cole looks over at her, then reaches out and runs his hand over her red hair. “She is very beautiful. You keep good company.”

“Leave her alone. There’s no point,” I tell him. “Scarlets don’t mix well with other Scarlets.”

“They can if they’re bound and weaker than you are.” The devilish smile returns, and my stomach lurches.

“Why are you doing this?” Yarra says.

“For the oldest reason in the world. Vengeance. My family has suffered at the hands of the Table for far too long. I have been wronged, and I am owed payment. In blood.”

I put my hand on Yarra’s shoulder. I’ve never tried mind-linking with her before. I hope this works.

Keep him talking.

Her head jerks slightly toward me. Then she looks back at Cole. “Vengeance? What could my Nana have ever done to you?”

He looks at Yarra with confusion for a split second. “Your Nana?” He looks over at the old woman, then starts laughing. “Oh wow. That’s . . . that’s interesting.”

He walks over to Nana and leans into her. She flinches away from his face as it gets

close to hers. “You want to take off the mask, Nana ? I think the time for pretend is over, don’t you?”

Nana looks at Yarra, her eyes watery. She mutters an I’m sorry through the gag.

Blinding light radiates from Nana, filling the room. I take the split second to step away from Yarra and closer to Cole. When the light fades, Nana’s gone, and in her place is a woman with long blonde hair . . . and the same features as Yarra.

“M-mom?”

She nods, tears rolling down her face.

“How sweet,” says Cole. “I love reunions. It’s too bad my mother’s dead. Right, Jean?”

Mother closes her eyes and looks down, guilt all over her face. Cole walks around to her chair and pats her on the shoulder twice. “It was your vote to ‘remove’ her from the Table, wasn’t it? After you all found out she had given birth to a Scarlet.”

The story Mother told me about the woman who had to give her Scarlet child up for adoption comes back to me. She was so nonchalant about it. What a scandal . . .

That woman was Cole’s mother, but Mother hadn’t said that she was dead.

“I didn’t find out what happened to her until a few years ago,” Cole says. He moves to the chair at the head of the table and sits down. “Started dating a woman who used to be one of you. An old professor, in fact. One night after sex, she told me the story of a woman that ‘disappeared’ at Moonhelm. She even described her to me. When I realized who she was talking about, I questioned her further.” He taps one finger on the table, looking down at it while he spoke. I’m edging as close as I can to him. “I

have to say, your staff is very resilient . . . even for wolves. She was no match for me in the end. It only took about three hours to get her to tell me about the Table and my mother.” He smiles sinisterly, his eyes unfocused in some gruesome memory. “I took another five to vent my frustration about it.”

He pointed one finger at Mother. “ You three and the rest of the Table decided to execute my mother unless she could tell you the location of her son. I shudder to think what you might’ve done to me had she told you.” He glared with a deep frown of disgust. “Barbarians. All of you.”

Mother mumbles through her gag, and Cole rolls his eyes. “I can’t understand you,” he grunts, annoyed, like she was putting him out. He waves his hand. The gag disappears.

“It was you.” My mother’s voice sounds hoarse and frightened. “You killed the other Table members.”

“Yes. I. Did.” He stands and leans into my mother. “You all have a debt to pay. But good news for you. You’re almost paid up.”

I see my moment. He’s leaning over, and I’m out of his eyesight. I change into a wolf quickly. He sees me change just as I start for him, leaping onto the table in a single bound. He doesn’t have time to react. I’m on him in a flash.

We topple down to the floor, and I lunge for his throat. He grabs me by the neck, pushing me back, struggling to keep me from tearing him apart. He’s remarkably strong in his human form. I can barely get a good snap at him.

I finally connect, biting him on the arm. He yells out momentarily and slams his hand against the side of my head. It’s enough for me to release my grip on him. He gets his legs under my stomach and kicks me off. I go rolling over the floor, but I’m back on

my feet again. I lunge for him as he gets to his feet.

“Heel!” he shouts, thrusting his hand toward me. A bolt of lightning jumps from his fingertips and hits me, the shock racing through me. Light and pain seize my muscles and sends me flying backward, hitting the wall hard.

I fall to the floor . . . The floor . . . is cold . . . my . . . my muscles . . . heartbeat . . . slow . . .

The darkness . . . the darkness is closing around me . . .

“ N O!”

The electricity engulfs Chad. The air is split with static, and there is a stench of burning fur as he flies backward. He hits the floor with a thud, his body jerking.

I can feel him dying. No, no, no . . .

I scream. My body vibrates from the sound as it echoes around me, whipping the air like a gust of wind. With a roar of fury, a surge of power courses through my veins. My body convulses as my bones crack and rearrange themselves, a new pain rushing through me, filling me with purpose, my power coming clear.

The primal energy of my lycan nature takes over. My senses heighten. My muscles bulge as silver fur sprouts all over my body. My nails elongate into sharp claws, and my teeth sharpen into fangs. My eyes blaze with an otherworldly intensity as I turn to face the one who hurt my Alpha.

My lycan form stands tall, my chest heaves with anticipation. I let out a primal growl, my instincts taking over as my eyes lock onto Cole.

Cole stands up straight and narrows his eyes at me. “So,” he says, “the witchwolf finally emerges.”

I snarl through my teeth. My vision is filled with red, but I can also see the waves of energy coming off Cole. See the power fluctuate as he sizes me up. His power is strong, but limited. His attention is drawn in too many directions. Inside, I smile. He is no match for my power.

I'm going to rip him to pieces.

Cole walks around the table and lets out a roar before changing. In seconds, his human form shifts and becomes the wolf within him, large and blood-red with glowing red eyes. He charges for me, moving at the speed of light. At the last moment, he launches himself at me.

I leap out of the way, catching him with a swipe of my great clawed paw across his abdomen. He roars, tumbling ass over teakettle and slamming into the ground.

I don't wait for him to get up. I jump on top of him, and we're brawling. Claws swipe at my face. My jaws snap back at him.

Finally, he kicks me off, and I'm in the air. I can see the currents around me, so I glide, slowing down my momentum until I land softly on my feet.

Witchwolf, he mind-links at me. I am about to end you.

He bounds toward me. Out of nowhere, a flash of snarling red fur slams into him, sending him rolling into the wall.

Saffron, freed from his psychic grip when he shifted, stands tall, growling as her hackles rise. She is ready to aid me in defeating him.

But there's no need. This son of a bitch is mine.

He gets to his feet again, the energy around him a pale yellow with fear. I bound toward him, changing back to human as I move. I grab him by the scruff of his neck and pull him up, pinning him to the wall as I grab his throat.

His wolf's eyes are wide with fear and astonishment as I hold him here. Power surges

through me, giving me strength enough to crush his windpipe. He struggles, his paws wrapping around my arms to try to claw them away. I let out a surge of power and push them off easily as I squeeze his throat.

You . . . you are just a human . . . , he mind-links to me. This cannot be your power . . .

“And yet, it is,” I say aloud. With barely a thought and a fraction of the energy surging with me, I squeeze his larynx under my grip and rip it free from his throat. Cole emits one last gurgled cry, then falls face down on the floor, a pool of blood forming beneath him.

“It’s over,” Saffron says a few seconds later. I look up to see that the wolves have shifted back to human form. Suddenly, I’m hyperaware that we’re both naked, and I turn away. I am never going to get used to this.

“Hey,” Saffron says brightly. “You found your lycan! I can’t believe you were the silver wolf from my vision!”

I turn back to her and smile. Okay, so maybe I can ignore it for the moment. “Yeah . . . Yeah, I guess I am.”

Saffron puts out her arms and says, “Come on. Bring it in.”

I laugh. “Maybe later.”

“Yarra.” My mom comes running toward me. She grabs me and pulls me into a warm hug, and all the embarrassment of the moment leaves me. The arms I’ve missed for so long are finally around me. I hold her tight, afraid of letting go.

“Mom,” I say, fighting back tears. “It was you? All along? I don’t understand. Why

didn't you just tell me?"

She looks down into my face. I'm amazed. She looks exactly the way I remember her. She's got my round face with a smattering of freckles across her nose. Her platinum hair is messy, the way it always has been, and her blue eyes, the same as mine, sparkle in the light around us.

"To keep you safe," she says. "It's a long story. Right now, you've got more important things to do."

She steps away and points towards Chad, still a wolf . . . and as still as the air around us. His mother is kneeling next to him, tears rolling down her face. Dean Fowler looks to Saffron and says quietly, "Let's go find help, shall we?"

Saffron nods and follows him out of the room.

I stand there, trying to sense Chad. I can't feel his heartbeat. I put my hand to my chest, my eyes stinging hard with salty tears. I can't feel him . . .

"No," I say, shaking my head. I walk over to his body and kneel down next to him. His mother shakes her head sadly.

"He's gone," she says, her voice thick with tears. "My son is gone."

As I put my hands into his fur, I sense his warmth. Oh, God . . . He's still warm . . .

"You can save him," my mother says softly. "You have to bring him back from the brink, Yarra."

"How? I . . . I don't know—" I start to sob.

She walks over and kneels down next to me. “Yes, you do. He’s your Alpha. All you have to do is call him back.”

I look at her, confused. I don’t know what she means.

“Close your eyes and reach out to him.”

I do as I’m told, and I close my eyes. I feel it in my heart. Like an arm reaching forward to find him. After a moment, I can feel his heart beating. Faint and far off. My energy moves in his direction, connecting with it as it stands at the bridge that crosses over from life to death.

My Alpha. My love. Please come back to me . . .

His energy links with mine, grabbing hold as I pull him back. There’s no resistance. He comes back as easily as if we were holding hands the whole way.

I open my eyes as the energy drains out of me and into Chad’s body. He stirs, a low growl rumbling under my hand. Slowly, he changes back into his human form, his fur retreating around my fingers, his bones moving and reforming under his skin.

And then, he opens his eyes.

I fall on him, embracing him as the tears start to come. “I thought I’d lost you.”

His hand grabs my arm as he groans a little. “I was lost,” he says softly. “But I heard you calling me back. You found me.”

I look into his eyes, and he smiles, reaching up and brushing the hair out of my face. “I could never leave my Luna.”

We kiss, our lips connecting with our souls. He is mine and I am his.

When our lips part, he looks over at his mother. “What did I miss?”

She laughs in spite of her tears. “You made a fine choice in your Luna,” she says. She looks at me and touches my hand, squeezing it. “Welcome to the family, dear.”

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I got the story from Mom sometime after everything happened. She sat me down and told me that when I was a little girl, there were members of the Table in town, looking for me. At the same time that she found out about them, Nana had passed. Since she hadn't told me yet, she decided to assume her identity instead.

"It was never supposed to last as long as it did," Mom told me as we sat and drank tea in the student lounge. "I thought I could just wait them out. And when they moved on, I could let you know what happened . . . but you were so young. I didn't know how to tell you in a way that you could understand."

And so Mom went on assuming Nana's identity, believing that I would eventually go on with my life. No one came looking for us, and she thought I'd be safe.

Until the day I found my mother's graduation papers.

At first, she tried to discourage me with all her platitudes on how Moonhelm was too strange a place, but when she saw how determined I was to go there to find her, she decided to let me go, thinking that everything about her had been wiped away, anyway. She expected me to come home in a few weeks, and that would be that.

Then Cole showed up at our house. Somehow, despite her best efforts, he kidnapped her as part of his grand plan. How he figured out who she really was, that part will probably stay a mystery forever.

I've been thinking about her story all day today. And now, in a few hours, I'll officially be Chad's Luna under the eyes of the Moon Goddess. God, what a weird statement to make.

Mom sacrificed a lot to protect us. I wonder if I'll do the same when Chad and I have children. Puppies? Whichever.

I look at myself in the mirror. My wedding dress is long and white and silky. It clings to my hips, making me look more hourglass-like than usual. I love it for its simplicity. The thin straps over my shoulders leave something to be desired, though. It's been a few months since Chad first marked me and the wound still kind of shows.

"Hey, hey!" The door opens, and Saffron appears, her long bright-red satin bridesmaid dress swishing as she rushes in. "Just had a peek out into the crowd. Guess who's here."

"Who?"

"The Alpha King and his Luna! Can you believe it? We've got real royalty in the house."

My face flushes as I look back into the mirror. "Oh . . . Oh, do I look okay?" I fuss with my hair, which is up and looks like a amethyst waterfall with all the ringlets falling around my neck.

"You look amazing!" She takes me by the shoulders. We both look at ourselves in the mirror, and all the jitters go away. We do look pretty damn good.

"One of these days," she says, "the roles will be reversed. When I find my neutral, that is."

"I look forward to it."

The door opens again, and it's Mom. She stands there for a moment, her eyes watery as she looks at my dress. "Oh," she says. "You are so beautiful."

“Mom, no. Don’t start. If you get going, I’m going to ruin my makeup!”

“I’m sorry,” she says with a smile. “Turning off the faucet. You about ready?”

I look at Saffron, who takes my hand and squeezes it for encouragement. “As I’ll ever be.”

We walk out of the building and out to the clearing behind us. The moon is high above us as all the members of our packs surround us, leaving a path for me to follow. Chad is standing at an altar with Dean Fowler, waiting to preside over our marriage.

My mother takes my hand and smiles down at me. “Let’s get you to your Alpha.”

We walk down the aisle, surrounded by the smiling faces of people I’ve never met before but I guess are a part of my new pack. I can’t wait to meet them all.

I get to the altar, and Chad takes my hands. He looks down at me, a smile playing at the corners of his mouth. “You are so beautiful,” he whispers. “My Luna. Forever.”

“Forever,” I whisper back to him.

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