



# Cursed By Fate (The Shifterverse #2)

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** The alpha who ruined my life just claimed me as his mate. And I can't stop dreaming about his mouth.

I was supposed to die fighting him.

Instead, I woke up in a cell—cursed, furious, and fated to a man who growls like sin.

Tristan Voss is a possessive alpha with a stare that melts bones.

He thinks I'm the key to some ancient prophecy.

I think he's full of shit.

I've seen what fate does to women like me.

But when he looks at me like I belong to him

When he touches me like I'm the only thing that matters

The line between hate and hunger blurs.

He wants to break my curse.

But he doesn't know I might break him first.

Cursed by Fate is a spicy enemies-to-lovers shifter romance following a cursed she-wolf and the rival alpha desperate to break their curse and claim her heart. Cursed by Fate is part of The Shifterverse, an interconnected series of standalones.

Book #1 can be found here: [Mine to Claim](#) by JP Sina

**Total Pages (Source):** 30

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:07 am*

Tristan

The storm clung to the mountain like it had a warning to deliver.

Wind howled through the narrow spires of Stormvale, sharp and biting, curling around the stone towers like claws.

The air was thick with the scent of snow and lightning—wild, electric, ancient.

From the overlook, the peaks rose jagged and untamed, silhouetted against a violet sky.

My home. My birthright. And lately, a kingdom on the verge of fracture.

I pushed open the heavy wooden door to Morrigan's chamber deep in the heart of the mountain, the scent of sage and ironroot thick in the air.

Candles flickered along the stone walls, casting shadows that danced across the runes etched into the floor like scars.

She stood at the center of the circle, unmoving, her long silver hair whipping around her like it had a life of its own.

“You called for me,” I said, voice low. Controlled.

Morrigan opened her eyes, irises pale silver and unfocused. “Stormvale is shifting. The old threads fray. A threat is coming.”

My body tensed. “From where?”

She didn’t answer immediately. Her fingers dipped into the fire and came away clean. “It’s not just from where. It’s who . Someone who carries the weight of false crowns and broken oaths.”

Alaric.

The name surfaced in my mind like rot beneath still water. I still remembered the look in the Silver Ridge alpha’s eyes the last time we stood across from each other—cold, gleaming like stone. He wanted the mountain’s power, and he’d gut us all to take it. “Silver Ridge,” I said.

Morrigan’s gaze flicked to me then, sharp. “You assume much.”

“He’s tried to claim what isn’t his before. He’ll try again. He always does.”

Her silence wasn’t confirmation, but it didn’t need to be.

The celestial stones, buried deep in the heart of Stormvale, had always been the target.

My pack’s legacy, our strength, came from the mountain’s bond with those stones.

We drew our magic from this land, from rituals older than any bloodline.

If Alaric wanted to weaken us, he’d come for the source.

“Tell me what you saw,” I demanded.

Morrigan tilted her head, the flames behind her flaring blue. “The mountain groans

beneath stolen crowns. Blood seeks blood. But one flame cannot be claimed—it must choose.”

I clenched my jaw. She never gave straight answers—only riddles stitched together with smoke and half-truths. But I knew what I heard.

The mountain was in danger. My pack was in danger.

“And that’s not all,” Morrigan said softly. Her tone shifted, strange and distant, like she wasn’t quite in her own body. “The mate bond stirs.”

That froze me.

“What did you say?”

“I saw you,” she said, eyes unfocused. “You, and another. A light bound to your shadow. A flame that does not fear the dark.”

A chill scraped down my spine. I’d long since stopped hoping for that kind of connection. I’d buried that hope years ago, shoved it down beneath the bones of wolves I couldn’t save. Love wasn’t for alphas. Not for me. I didn’t have the luxury of longing.

“No,” I said, the word more a breath than a denial. “I have no mate. There’s no room for it.”

“You don’t have to want it for it to be true,” Morrigan murmured. “She is coming. Or you are going to her. The vision wasn’t clear.”

“Where?”

“I don’t know,” she said, her voice growing distant again. “But when you meet her, the world will tilt. The stones were not forged for wolves, but taken by them in a time of desperation...”

I turned away from the altar, the fire suddenly too hot against my skin.

The storm outside beat harder against the mountain, wind screaming through the peaks like it was trying to break the walls open.

I didn’t have time to chase riddles. Not when the threat was already moving.

Not when the mountain’s magic was shifting beneath our feet.

My jaw clenched. Two visions. Two warnings. One of blood and broken bonds. One of a mate fated by moonlight. And all I could see in their blurred edges was Alaric’s shadow creeping back over my mountain. Was it a trick? A curse? Or something worse—the truth?

If Alaric was coming for the stones again, I’d stop him before he reached the border. I couldn’t afford to wait for the mate Morrigan claimed was fated to appear. Not when I had a duty to defend everything Stormvale stood for.

I walked out into the cold, the air sharp with ice and magic. Stormvale pulsed beneath me, a warning in every breath of wind.

Let fate play its games.

I had a war to start.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:07 am*

### Chapter one

Serena

The forest didn't feel right tonight.

Shadows stretched too long beneath the towering pines, reaching like twisted claws over the rain-softened earth.

Each sound—the trill of crickets, the heavy flap of an owl's wings—itched against my skin.

The air was too still, too heavy, and my instincts whispered what I didn't want to admit: I wasn't alone.

I halted mid-step, boots sinking into the damp, mossy earth, and reached for the blade strapped to my thigh. My fingers tightened against the leather hilt as I scanned the trees around me. Nothing. No movement, no scent... but my wolf stirred anyway, restless beneath my skin.

It wasn't paranoia.

It was survival.

They called it “patrolling,” but I wasn't stupid.

I wasn't guarding the border; I was being thrown to it.

This was punishment dressed as duty—a convenient way to dispose of me at the edge of the Silver Ridge borders, where I couldn't draw attention to myself.

They knew I'd rather run a hundred miles solo than endure another hour as the unwelcome outcast in our camp.

Even my father, the great alpha of Silver Ridge, didn't bother pretending he wanted me there.

I exhaled sharply and rubbed at the crescent moon etched into my wrist. It gleamed pale against my skin, faintly illuminated by the deep lavender wash of twilight. Crescent moon. Stars. Such an innocent mark for something that had made me an outcast in my own pack.

My father, brilliant and distant as ever, had told me it was my birthright.

That I was special. For a child desperate for approval, those words had been intoxicating once.

But the truth had turned sour by the time I was old enough to understand.

The curse was something more—a scar, a reminder of ancestral sins, and I was marked to pay the price.

Those born bearing the mark must find a way to break the curse, or they'll never be able to form a true mate bond.

Without a mate, sometimes the marked grow wild with fury and rage, making them a threat to themselves or others.

Like a real ticking time bomb. It was also a signal to my packmates that I wasn't one

of them. Not really.

I could handle the whispers and the stares, even the isolation. I'd stopped craving acceptance years ago. But every time I caught my father's gaze—hard, sharp, and shadowed with exhaustion—I saw the weight of his disappointment and the fear of what I might become. That, I couldn't forgive.

"You'll never be free," his voice murmured in my head, a ghost of his latest admonishment that haunted me still. "You'll wander like a lost soul until fate decides otherwise. That's what you are, Serena. A burden the pack must carry."

I snorted in defiance, fists clenching around the blade as I kept walking. Screw him. Screw all of them. If the Silver Ridge pack saw me as a burden, then they didn't deserve my loyalty. Loneliness had teeth, but so did I.

Still, the forest hung heavy tonight—heavier than usual.

I crouched low to the damp earth, calming my pulse as I took in a deep breath. The air should've been clean, full of the familiar scents of pine sap and decaying leaves. But beneath that, so faint it pinched against my awareness, was a scent I didn't recognize—sharp, smoky, metallic.

And getting closer.

I didn't have time to react.

The beast erupted from the tree line with a snarl, a blur of brown fur and barreling muscle that came straight for my throat. My knife was in my hand in an instant as I twisted away, narrowly dodging its snapping jaws. There wasn't time to think—just to survive.

I lashed out, the blade finding its mark against the wolf's shoulder, and it howled. Before I could strike again, more shadows emerged from the trees, their glowing eyes locking on me with terrifying precision. They shouldn't have been here. They weren't supposed to be here .

"Stormvale wolves," I hissed, my voice raw as the snarl of my inner wolf surged to my throat.

The Stormvale pack knew our borders as well as we knew theirs.

The Silver Ridge wolves were certainly no friends of the Stormvale pack, yet we weren't their typical targets, either.

The origins of our hostility had faded into obscurity, with no recent raids or battles for territory.

.. until tonight. They'd crossed the border into Silver Ridge, which meant they weren't here for posturing or empty threats.

They'd come armed, coordinated, and determined for blood.

Why?

Rumors of rising tensions had crept through Silver Ridge for weeks, but no one took them seriously.

Until now. Two wolves charged me from opposite sides, their movements fluid and terrifyingly synchronized.

My boots skidded against the slick earth as I dropped to the ground, narrowly avoiding a set of snapping jaws that passed just inches from my neck.

A feral growl ripped from my chest as I tossed the blade aside and let the shift take me.

The change hit like a thunderclap—bones snapping, skin dissolving into silver fur, the forest suddenly hyper-sharp, colors brighter, smells overwhelming.

Rage pulsed under my skin now, replacing the sharp thorns of fear, and I didn't hesitate.

I lunged for the nearest wolf, biting down hard enough to taste blood as my claws raked its ribs.

One down. Five more circling.

I was trained for defense, not a six-on-one assault. And definitely not for him.

The clearing fell deadly quiet when he stepped into the fray, his massive black-furred body radiating an aura that made my hackles rise. This was no soldier. No second-in-command. This was him.

The Stormvale alpha.

He stepped into the clearing like the storm had summoned him—massive, black-furred, and pulsing with dominance.

His eyes—ice-blue, ancient, and too intelligent—collided with mine.

My breath hitched. Not out of fear. Something worse.

Something primal. Something that made my wolf whimper and bare her throat.

I didn't want to, didn't mean to, but there was something in the weight of his stare that pinned me in place.

For the first time, I felt my wolf falter. Not out of fear, but something more dangerous: instinctive submission.

I shook my head, angry and defiant, and lunged for him.

Bad move.

His packmates rushed me from behind, one snapping at my hind leg while the others pinned my sides. I squirmed and fought as teeth sunk shallow into my shoulder, but a single, commanding growl from the alpha stilled me instantly.

I shifted back, panting and furious as mud and blood smeared my skin. The alpha's pack mates shifted back and held my arms pinned with a bruising grip. My human body felt exposed here, but I refused to show weakness—not to my enemy, and certainly not to him .

“You're a long way from home, alpha,” I spat, my voice laced with venom.

The Stormvale alpha tilted his head as he shifted to stand before me, his black fur giving way to broad, muscled flesh.

His body was built like the mountain he ruled—tall, broad-chested, scarred from battles he'd clearly won.

Intricate tattoos told the stories of those battles, his pack's history, his life.

The alpha's hair was dark and unruly, like night caught in a storm, and his eyes were colder than a glacier's edge.

Every inch of him said danger. And yet, my mark burned under my skin like it wanted him anyway.

He crossed his arms over his scarred chest and tattered flannel, looking down on me with infuriating calm, as if I were nothing more than a minor inconvenience.

“Serena.” He said my name with deliberate cruelty, letting it settle into the air between us.

“How—”

“We make it a habit to know our enemies,” he interrupted, his voice low and sharp as a blade. “And you, little wolf, are very interesting.”

When I growled and lunged, he took a step back as a low chuckle escaped his throat, as if I had amused him somehow.

“Careful,” he warned, voice calm but thick with authority. “You don’t want to make this worse for yourself.”

“Go to hell.”

His lips twitched, a glimmer of amusement flickering across them before disappearing. “Bind her,” he ordered. The two men holding me hostage complied, snapping crude ropes around my wrists as their gloved hands worked quickly.

The second the wolfsbane-laced rope bit into my skin, a scream shot through my veins. It wasn’t pain—it was suppression. Like something holy was being strangled inside me. I fought, snarling and writhing, but it was no use.

“You’ll regret this,” I spat as they dragged me back to my feet.

“Quiet,” the alpha snapped, his expression unreadable. But just before he turned away, I saw something unusual: a mark.

It was a pale, faint crescent moon near his shoulder, peeking out from a tear in his shirt.

The air sucked from my lungs. My mark itched at the sight of his, a faint warmth rippling across my wrist where the crescent moon and stars were burned into my skin.

Impossible.

It couldn't be.

It sparked under the moonlight like a glinting blade, and everything I knew about curses shifted beneath my feet. A Stormvale alpha with the same mark? That wasn't just dangerous—it was heresy. Treason.

“What the hell are you?” I whispered, my mind tangled in a thousand questions no one could answer.

He glanced back at me then, his gaze narrowing briefly. The corners of his mouth twitched, but not into a smile.

“Your survival just got interesting,” he muttered, just loud enough for me to hear.

And damned if my cursed heart didn't stutter.

But in the midst of my fury and panic as the Stormvale alpha led me deeper into unfamiliar forest, one thought took root in my mind and refused to let go:

Whoever this alpha was, he wasn't just my enemy. He was something worse. A

prophecy in flesh. A fate carved into my skin.

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*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:07 am*

### Chapter two

#### Tristan

The scent of smoke and blood clung to me as I strode through the winding tunnels of the sanctuary, the steady cadence of my boots echoing across the stone walls.

Shadows from the torchlight flickered and leaped against the jagged surfaces, twisting into sharp shapes that clawed at my periphery.

The ceiling glowed faintly with veins of lunar crystal—remnants of the storm goddess's blessing.

It pulsed with the pack's unity. Tonight, it flickered like it couldn't decide if we still deserved it.

The mountain didn't sleep. It listened. It judged.

Every echo that rang through its stone bones reminded me I was never alone here—not really.

We were born of its magic. Strengthened by it.

Bound to it. But tonight, the walls felt colder.

Sharper. As if it, too, was waiting to see what I'd do with her.

Silence had always been an ally, a part of the mountain's rhythm that mirrored my own. Tonight, though, it grated. Behind the quiet, I could hear them— my pack—whispering in chambers and alcoves. The weight of each hushed word dragged against my instincts.

They were questioning me. My choice. My leadership.

And perhaps they had every damn right to.

Bringing her here—bringing Serena here—was reckless at best, dangerous at worst. When I'd made the call after the raid earlier tonight, I told myself it was calculated.

But now, as the hum of unease swelled around me, gnawing at the edges of my precision, doubt hung like a chain around my neck.

I ran a hand through my disheveled hair, my fingers snagging on the dark strands. "Dammit," I muttered, the word hanging heavy in the silent room. The weight of my decision pressed down on me, an invisible burden that threatened to crush my resolve.

Serena's face flashed in my mind - those defiant amber eyes boring into me, challenging me even as I'd ordered her taken captive. My wolf stirred restlessly beneath my skin, drawn to her in a way I couldn't explain. I clenched my fists, nails biting into my palms.

"Strength isn't just muscle," I reminded myself. But what good was strength when faced with an impossible choice?

I moved to the window, gazing out at the star-strewn sky. The constellations glimmered, indifferent to the turmoil below. How many nights had I stood here, seeking answers in those distant pinpricks of light?

“What would you have done, father?” I whispered, the words bitter on my tongue.

Images of blood-soaked battles flashed through my mind - the legacy of hatred between our packs stretching back generations. My father's mistakes loomed large, his hunger for vengeance nearly destroying our pack. And now here I stood, poised to repeat history.

The cut on my shoulder stung as the air in the mountain tunnels grew colder, but the pain wasn't enough to ground me.

My senses were already raw, straining beyond my control, flaring in ways that had nothing to do with blood loss.

Every fiber in my body pulsed with unrest, my wolf's instincts pulling tight and demanding answers I didn't have.

Her scent still clung to me.

The entire sanctuary carried it now. It unfurled in waves, wild and sweet—like the bite of honeysuckle in the early summer air.

No matter how long or far I walked, no matter how deep I pushed into the maze-like chambers of this mountain, it followed.

Invisible but persistent, curling around my senses like a living thing.

And it was driving me out of my fucking mind.

Serena.

Her scent shouldn't make me ache. It shouldn't remind me of heat, of nights I

couldn't afford to want.

But it did. And the worst part? My wolf didn't hate it.

It wanted more. I bit back a low growl, breathing through my nostrils as I descended deeper into the tunnels, my boots crunching across loose gravel that no one had bothered to clear from the main path.

It wasn't her name. It wasn't her fire or the defiance that cracked against me like lightning in a storm.

It wasn't even the spectacle she'd made of herself, spitting in my face and daring me to regret taking her alive.

It was her mark .

The cursed moon and stars on her wrist—too faint to catch light until she was writhing in pain from the wolfsbane on the ropes. The welts on her wrist still haunted me. I'd smelled her pain when they tied her—bitter, burning. No one else had noticed. But I had. And I hadn't stopped it.

"This changes nothing," I whispered to no one, shaking my head sharply, trying to shove her from my mind.

She was a Silver Ridge wolf, my enemy, and she's tethered to an ancient curse that could rip apart our packs and undo everything I'd spent my life building.

Yet somehow—I gritted my teeth at the thought—she'd managed to sink hooks under my skin in the space of a single hour.

I clenched my jaw as I rounded a corner, the wide entrance to one of the larger

assembly chambers now visible ahead. My wolf stirred in my chest—the connection restless but unspoken, an unnamable hum that vibrated my bones. For fuck’s sake, if I didn’t get my head together, I’d—

“You’re late.”

Ewan’s voice hit me like a slap, sharp and deliberately antagonistic.

His lean form leaned against the chamber wall, silhouetted by the fiery torches and the faint mineral glow of the cave.

His arms were crossed, his lips curved down into a sneer.

The other ranking pack members gathered with him exchanged nervous, sidelong glances, their unease suspended in the air like heavy fog.

I leveled my stare at him, steady and cold. “I didn’t realize I was on a schedule.”

Ewan pushed off the wall and stepped closer, his movements efficient, deliberate.

“The pack isn’t blind, Tristan.” His voice curled low and rough at the edges, his loyalty laced with challenge.

“They see the enemy in the cell, the Silver Ridge wolf taking up our air, and they want to know why .” His shoulders squared, his jaw ticking.

“Hell, so do I. We were supposed to take out the alpha, not kidnap his damn daughter.”

My fingers itched to clench, but I kept my hands loose at my sides. Authority wasn’t all power and rage; it was control. And I wasn’t about to let Ewan—or anyone

else—mistake my calculus for hesitation.

“You’ll address her properly,” I replied, my tone a sharp blade of warning, “unless you’re ready to challenge my judgment in front of the entire pack.”

Ewan stiffened, the subtleties of his wolf rippling beneath his skin. Our bond as alpha and beta tempered the tension, keeping it just short of outright rebellion—at least for now. Behind us, the pack stood silent, waiting like the trees before a storm.

“I don’t question your right to lead,” Ewan said, his words edged with caution but no less direct. “But I question the choice you’ve made. You brought a curse into these tunnels. A curse, Tristan—and for what? Leverage? You’ve dealt a blow to Silver Ridge before. We could’ve crushed them—”

“Do you think I don’t know that?” I snapped, sharper than I intended. “The decision wasn’t up for debate.”

“It should’ve been.”

My wolf surged toward the surface, ears back, tail high.

It hated being questioned. Hated the smell of doubt pouring off Ewan like sweat.

The chamber bristled. At least three nearby wolves stiffened visibly in their seats, and I caught the faint metallic tang of restless adrenaline in their sweat.

I shifted my eyes just long enough to acknowledge their unease before returning to Ewan, refusing to drop my voice any lower than necessary.

“You’ve stood beside me long enough to know what a battlefield looks like. Decisions don’t wait, not when the stakes are set in blood. And this one? This was

about more than a border skirmish.”

I let the weight of the sentence linger, my gaze sweeping across the room for emphasis. “Serena isn’t just leverage. She’s tied to something bigger than this war, and until I figure out what , she stays here. Any objections?”

Ewan snorted softly, his expression grim.

“You’re saying you risked the pack for answers , Tristan?

Stormvale's strength runs through these very stones,” he growled.

“You start shaking the foundation with prophecy and curses, and it’s not just your title on the line.

You risk the blood-rite bond we swore under the full moon. ”

“I’m saying I risked the pack for certainty,” I snapped, finally letting my words edge with command.

“If any of you think Serena is the reason we’re at war, you’re more ignorant than I thought.

This curse, this prophecy —it doesn’t end with one pack over the other. Not if tonight was any indication.”

Ewan stepped forward, his shoulders squaring until he was barely a foot away.

“You think the pack gives a shit about curses?” he murmured, his gaze low and sharp beneath the torchlight.

He wasn't raising his voice, but he didn't need to.

Ewan's anger cut colder when it was quiet.

"They see a rogue with a mark—and they see you hesitating for the first time since you've held this title.

This isn't like you... and it's putting cracks where there shouldn't be any. "

He hesitated for the smallest beat, his jaw clenching before continuing. "I don't want cracks, Tristan. I want survival."

I took two steps forward, closing the remaining distance between us. "I know what happened tonight. I know where the lines were. I know what could have spilled over onto this stone if I'd let it. But I made a call—one your position demands you either accept or challenge. Which will it be?"

Ewan's gaze flickered briefly, his teeth locked audibly before he dropped them with a slight tilt of his head. Submission, barely.

Good.

But a half-step away from rebellion.

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*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:07 am*

The pack dispersed begrudgingly after I assured them of further answers tomorrow during committees—a political formality if nothing else. But Ewan lingered behind, and though tension still hung like smoke between us, I didn't send him away.

Ewan and I had history too deep to ignore, even when he grated against me.

He'd stood by my shoulder when we were both too young to wield authority—teenagers climbing a mountain we shouldn't have had to scale alone.

It was Ewan who'd gathered the pack in my father's absence, handed me the wolves' loyalty, and bound himself to me when no one else would.

That kind of camaraderie didn't dissolve in a single night.

But it cracked around the edges, sharp and dangerous, every time resentment reared its head.

"You never let anyone close," he said finally, pacing as his heels scuffed the stone floor. "So why her?"

I leaned my hands against the oak table in the center of the chamber, turning my head just slightly to glance at him. My reflection stared back faintly in the maps spread across the surface—just shadows against parchment. I didn't answer immediately.

His frustration boiled over. "Tristan, damn it—"

"Because there's something different ," I said, my voice low but clipped, steady.

“Something tied to the curse she carries—the one she doesn’t even fully understand. And with the prophecy Morrigan warned of, I have to be sure.”

Ewan flinched, inhaling sharply through clenched teeth.

I didn’t owe him details, but he wasn’t someone I could leave in the dark about everything.

He wouldn’t use her, not so long as the question of her importance remained unanswered, but his doubt would spread to the pack quickly if I wasn’t honest about—at least—half of what I knew.

“What kind of ‘different?’” He crossed his arms but lowered his tone.

I hesitated before speaking evenly: “Her mark. It’s the same as mine. The same as the trail of runes carved through these chambers. I saw it when you were tying her up.”

Ewan swore under his breath, the heat of his anger briefly traded with shock, followed by dawning concern.

“We bled for this pack,” Ewan muttered, eyes flashing.

“I watched your father burn, and I made sure you didn’t fall with him.

I just... I don’t want to lose you too. You sure it’s not some kind of—”

“Trick?” I cut him off, shaking my head. “No. It’s real. And she noticed mine, too.” My voice tightened as the memory flashed in my mind—her sharp intake of breath, the way her eyes widened as if she couldn’t believe what she was seeing. “Whatever this is, it’s not coincidence.”

Ewan slammed a fist against the table. The dull thud echoed through the chamber, his frustration crackling like firelight. “You’re gambling with the pack, Tristan. If the elders catch wind of this—or worse, if she’s some kind of weapon Silver Ridge planted—”

“She’s not a plant,” I snapped, standing straight.

The words came out faster than I intended, too charged.

I inhaled, refusing to meet Ewan’s eyes as realization settled dense and suffocating in my chest. Why was I so sure?

What was it about her that stripped away my detachment, leaving me raw and defensive in ways I’d never allowed myself to be before?

Besides, I recalled the last elder meeting and they’re already circling.

‘Stormvale should act like Stormvale,’ one had hissed.

As if they were waiting for an excuse to unseat me.

Ewan caught my hesitation and pounced on it. “You don’t know that. For all we know, she’s bait. A curse-touched wolf who could unravel everything we’ve built. You’re letting emotions cloud your judgment—”

“Watch your tone,” I growled, the warning clear in the low rumble of my voice. My wolf edged closer to the surface, demanding submission, but Ewan didn’t back down entirely.

“What tone should I use when my alpha might be risking the pack for one she-wolf who doesn’t belong here?”

” He glared, fists clenched at his sides.

“She’s dangerous. You know it. I know it.

And keeping her here doesn’t just endanger our lives—it calls everything into question.

You’ve worked too damn hard to let a mistake unravel it. ”

I turned away from him, jaw locked as I gripped the edge of the table hard enough that a lesser material might have cracked.

It wasn’t that I didn’t understand his anger, his doubt.

He wasn’t wrong—not entirely. If the council caught wind of this, they’d invoke the old laws—binding combat.

Challenge by blood. And if I lost... they’d tear Stormvale apart from the inside out.

But underneath his words was a challenge I couldn’t accept, not now, not when my resolve was fractured by thoughts of the wolf locked in the chamber down the hall.

I paced the length of the room, my fingers trailing along the rough stone. The cool touch grounded me, a stark contrast to the fire that seemed to ignite whenever I thought of Serena. “And what would you have me do? Release her? That's not an option.”

“We could ransom her,” Ewan suggested, his voice tight. “Get Alaric to agree to leave us alone and be done with this mess.”

I whirled to face him, a snarl building in my chest. “And risk her father's retaliation?

No. Not when they've already attacked us before, it's too risky. She stays."

The tension in the room was palpable, crackling like lightning before a storm. I could smell Ewan's anxiety, sharp and acrid, mingling with my own conflicted scent.

"She's not just a prisoner, Ewan," I answered finally, my voice low, measured. "She's something much larger than she knows. Larger than we know." I shifted my gaze to him over my shoulder, my ice-blue eyes locking with his. "And until I figure out exactly what that is, Serena stays."

Ewan inhaled slowly, the tension between us taut as a drawn bowstring. Then, with a stiff bow of his head, he relented—for now. "I hope you're right," he muttered, his voice still laced with skepticism. "Because if this thing spirals out of control, it'll be a storm none of us can outrun."

Without another word, he strode from the chamber, his boots striking the stone faster than necessary. I watched him go, my chest tight with the weight of leadership. I wanted to believe I was right—needed to believe it. But doubt gnawed at me like a wolf too long without a hunt.

The tunnels were quiet again, the sounds of conversation dimmed to faint murmurs in the background.

It was late; most of the pack would retreat to their respective chambers soon, turning to rest as they always did, safe under our mountain's protection.

But my wolf didn't feel like resting. It prowled beneath my skin, stirring with restless energy, pulling me toward the south wing of the sanctuary.

Toward her.

Answers. That's what I was going to find, or at least that's what I told myself.

The deeper I trekked into the sanctuary, the more the air shifted—damp and heavy, with a faint whistle from the mountain winds filtering through cracks in the stone.

My hand brushed against the jagged walls as I walked, a sensation that grounded me just enough to keep my thoughts in check.

The walls whispered history—runes etched into volcanic stone, long faded but never erased.

Some told stories of sacrifice. Others, warnings: “Break the bond, and the earth will bleed.” I'd ignored those as superstition once. Now... I wasn't so sure.

The passage narrowed briefly before opening into another carved hollow, the corridor that led directly to the secure quarters. Her scent was stronger here, wild and stubborn, though touched with something sharper—wolfsbane.

Good. At least the measures Ewan had ordered for her containment were working. It was enough to slow her wolf's strength without crippling her human form entirely. Still, it clawed at me, the thought of her wrists chafing against the bindings, her freedom stripped entirely.

Why does it matter? My own voice pushed the question like a scold, trying to rip away the concern that had no place here.

It didn't matter—not for her.

But for the prophecy tied to her mark.

This mark, this prophecy—it should've been a warning.

But now I wasn't sure if I wanted answers, or just another excuse to see her again.

It wasn't until I reached the thick iron bars of her chamber that I realized how tightly my fists were clenched.

I flexed my fingers, taking a slow breath to calm myself, before stepping silently into the dimly lit space.

She was sprawled on the cot against the far wall, her auburn hair wilder than it had been earlier.

The faint shift of her shoulders told me she wasn't asleep.

Her head snapped up, eyes locking on me like a predator spotting prey. "Come to gloat, Alpha?" she spat, her words as sharp as her glare. "Or are we skipping straight to the torture?"

Her fire didn't dim for anyone, not even in captivity—and gods help her, it was almost... magnetic.

Serena was now sitting on the edge of the cot, her bare, bruised wrists resting lightly on her lap. The torchlight made her hair glow like fire, and I hated that I noticed. Hated that I wanted to see more of her skin lit up by it.

"Are you planning to stand there brooding, or does the big bad alpha plan to say something?" she said, breaking the quiet without looking up. Her voice was sharp enough to slice bone, but her fire didn't bother hiding its wounds.

I stepped fully into the dim torchlight this time, my boots deliberate against the stone floor. She raised her head then, her hazel eyes narrowing as they met mine.

“Still breathing. Shame, really,” I finally answered smoothly, leaning one shoulder casually against the iron bars of her cell. The dry retort didn’t satisfy her, though. Serena’s eyes remained on mine, measuring me.

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“That’s the best you’ve got? Not very original for someone with oh-so-great alpha authority,” she said, smirking as she rose to stand. Her bare feet grazed against the stone with grace—as though the rough terrain meant nothing to her.

I stayed silent for a moment, watching. No matter how sharp her words, her body language betrayed the exhaustion she didn’t dare show, the faint tremor in her fingers as she gripped the cot behind her.

“How noble of you to play the silent protector. What... saved my life after all that bloodshed? Guilt? Pity?” She gritted her teeth before biting out the last venomous question. “Or is it leverage, pure and simple? What were you doing in Silver Ridge, anyway?”

I stepped closer, closing the gap until only the cold and illusion of the iron bars separated us. My grip firmed against the cold rungs as I leveled my voice low.

“You’re still breathing because you bear the same mark I do,” I said evenly.

This time, her reaction wasn’t immediately biting. Her carefully guarded smirk faltered, and I caught the flicker of frustration—or maybe fear—that bridged her silence.

I leaned forward just slightly, enough to seize my advantage. “I’m keeping you alive because whatever ties you to this prophecy isn’t something I can ignore, no matter the body count from your pack,” I said, my voice dangerously quiet.

Her breathing hitched just slightly, though she mastered her face quickly enough to

retort. “So I’m... what, then? Fate’s little experiment? Tied to your life now?” Her chin jutted up defiantly, even as her body tensed.

“Perhaps,” I admitted almost lazily. “But that doesn’t make you safe.”

That struck personal.

Despite myself, an amused exhale slipped from my lips. “Do you ever stop talking long enough to think?”

“I think just fine,” she shot back. “And I think you’re an arrogant wolf with too much time on his hands. What exactly do you want from me?”

I leaned against the bars, broad shoulders barely fitting between them as I folded my arms. “Answers.”

“Well, too bad.” She crossed her arms, raising a brow in mock defiance. “Because I don’t have any.”

I tilted my head, letting the faintest trace of a smirk curl the edge of my lips. “Don’t you?”

The tension between us thickened, her silence sharpening the air around us like an unsheathed blade.

She broke eye contact first, glancing briefly at her wrist. I didn’t need to see it to know what she was thinking.

She didn’t understand the mark any better than I did, and that fact seemed to unsettle her deeply.

Good.

“It’s nothing,” she said finally, her voice feigned indifference.

“That’s twice tonight you’ve lied to me,” I replied simply, though the steadiness of my voice carried far more weight than the words themselves. “Do you want to try again?”

Her eyes snapped back to mine, fire sparking somewhere deep within their hazel depths.

“What do you want me to say? That I don’t know why I have this stupid mark?

Or what it means?” Her voice was rising now, her frustration overriding her calculated defiance.

“Do you think I asked to be some cursed wolf that doesn’t belong anywhere? ”

I paused, the rawness of her words cutting deeper than I expected. Of all the things I anticipated from her, this—vulnerability buried beneath fiery bravado—was not one of them.

“This mark,” I said, tilting my head toward my shoulder, “it means something. To both of us. And until we figure out exactly what, you’ll stay here under my protection.”

“Protection?” She laughed bitterly, though it sounded more like a warning than humor.

“Don’t pretend this is about my safety.” She took a step closer, her chin tilting up defiantly despite the bars between us.

“You talk about protection like it’s a favor.

But I’ve seen that look in your eyes before—on alphas who lost control.

You’re not afraid for me. You’re afraid of me. ”

My wolf snarled in my chest, but I held myself steady, unwilling to give her the satisfaction of seeing me react. “I’m afraid of nothing.”

She lifted her chin as she smiled slightly, the muscles in her jaw flexing. It was sharp, feral, her exhaustion only making it more dangerous. “That’s exactly what someone who’s afraid would say.”

My grip on the bars tightened, the cold iron creaking faintly beneath my hands. “Careful, little wolf,” I growled, my voice dropping low enough to rumble against the stone walls. “You’re running out of room to push me.”

She met my gaze head-on, unflinching despite the obvious disparity in power between us. Damn her defiance. It shouldn’t interest me. Shouldn’t make my chest tighten the way it did now.

I pushed away from the bars, breaking the charged silence between us. Turning sharply on my heel, I left her standing there in the torchlight, her glare burning into my back.

The mountain wind howled outside my quarters, rattling the narrow window set high in the stone wall. I stared at the world beyond it—vast stretches of darkness interrupted by jagged peaks dusted with silvery snow. The moon hung heavy in the sky, bathing everything in an eerie, pale light.

She was right about one thing.

I was afraid.

Not of her, or of what she might do to my pack.

What scared me was infinitely worse—how she was changing me.

How one defiant prisoner could unearth questions I thought I'd buried long ago.

Questions about destiny, about sacrifice...

about what it meant to truly choose instead of simply follow duty's path.

Her voice echoed in my head, sharp and fiery, but beneath it, the faintest tremor of something softer.

It wasn't coincidence that our paths had crossed. That much, I was sure of. What I wasn't sure of was whether I'd survive whatever fate had chained us to.

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### Chapter three

Serena

The stone walls of my cell were too quiet—just like my room at Silver Ridge.

Too quiet, too still. That's where my mind always went first. Back to the dining table.

Back to him. Everyone in the pack was against me.

Even my own father, with his constant warnings and secrets, had made it clear that I was an outsider.

They wanted to trap me here like a prisoner, but I was determined to break free.

No one could keep me locked away forever.

I twirled a lock of hair, a nervous habit I couldn't quite shake, and thought back to when it all began.

I was a girl, sitting across from my father.

I remember the way his voice shook like an old tree when he said I was in danger.

He sat on the other side of a long oak table, brooding and silent, while I ate in quiet fury. I asked for a simple answer to a simple question, and it didn't seem like he'd ever give it to me.

“Serena,” he said finally. I watched him clench his hands into fists and unclench them as he paused. “I know you feel trapped.” I opened my mouth to argue, but he held up a hand to silence me. “But it is for your own protection. The outside world is dangerous.”

“You say that about everything,” I said, sitting back and crossing my arms. “I’m just going to the ridge with Lila. It’s not the moon.”

“That’s what you say now,” he said, his voice low. “But you are marked.”

I wanted to scream. To grab him by the shoulders and shake some sense into him. “You act like I have a target painted on me. You don’t understand that there’s more to life than this.” I gestured to the empty room around us. “You and the pack.”

He didn’t raise his voice. He didn’t need to. “There isn’t for you.”

Not a future. Not a choice. Just a prison with better lighting. Those words carved something out of me. I turned away so he wouldn’t see me cry.

I replayed his warning in my mind as I moved through the house, feeling the weight of every decision he’d ever made for me. They all carried the same condescending theme: I was a caged thing, and he would keep it that way. It was worse than him calling me a prisoner. It was like he knew I was cursed and didn’t even want me to be happy.

As if it wasn’t enough the curse would take my sanity from me eventually.

I made my way to the bedroom, torn between running away and fighting my father right there.

I thought maybe my room would feel less like a cell, but it didn’t.

He'd taken everything from me. My father couldn't take me seriously when he thought the curse was.

And it was serious. It had taken my mother from me, from him too, when I was seven.

The curse drove her mad, to the brink of insanity.

She had clawed her own heart out as the pack watched in horror.

What would I do when it came for me? Would I wake up screaming?

Start seeing things that weren't there? Or just.. . stop being me?

I slammed the door and pounded on my pillow, feeling like it was the only thing I had any power over. It wasn't like I was losing my damn mind. Yet.

My father must have known how desperate I was.

I wasn't subtle about it, and he sure didn't miss the big blowout in the dining room.

How could he think he was protecting me?

Maybe it wasn't protection at all. Maybe he wanted to see how long I could last before I broke.

I rolled over, burying my face in the pillow.

I wasn't going to break, not now or ever. He couldn't win.

After I left, he probably gave himself a medal for best performance of an emotionally

absent father. I wondered if he had the whole pack over for drinks and awards.

“Most Improved at Pretending to Care,” he’d announce to them, pinning a piece of scrap metal to his jacket.

The others would laugh, the sound hollow and hateful.

I imagined their sneering faces as they watched me crack under the weight of what my father thought was protection.

They all knew I didn’t belong, and not a single one of them did a thing to help me.

“Most Likely to Lose Her Shit,” they’d chant, pounding their drinks on the table. I twirled my hair as I thought about it, the memory of Alaric in the dining room creeping into my mind again.

“They don’t care about you, Serena,” he’d say. It wasn’t a sentence so much as a promise. He might have added: “Neither do I.”

The door slammed open and pulled me out of my thoughts.

“Guess what I heard,” Lila said, half excited, half suspicious, and all up in my face about it.

I started to sit up, but she pushed me back into the bed and pinned me there like I was a butterfly and she was the world’s most petite collector.

“Everyone is in the dining hall, acting like you’re the next wolfy war criminal. What happened?”

I waited to see if she’d answer her own question. I should have known she wouldn’t

until she ran out of air.

“Well?” she asked, moving back a little and giving me some room to breathe. “What happened?”

I pushed myself upright, crossing my legs in front of me. “My father thinks he can keep me trapped forever,” I said, trying not to let my voice quiver like I knew it was going to. “He doesn’t know that I’m ready to leave.”

Lila arched an eyebrow. “He’s your father, not an idiot,” she said. “You don’t have to tell me everything you told him, but at least tell me you kept the good dirt.”

“Why would he think he can control me like this?” I asked, hugging my knees and staring out the window. “He might as well put me in a cage.”

Her eyes softened. “Hey. Serena. Look at me.”

I didn’t.

“Serena,” she said again, putting a hand on my shoulder and giving it a gentle squeeze.

I turned and met her gaze.

“Fuck him,” she said, her voice low and serious, her sharp words wrapping themselves around my heart. “You’re not the only one he’s tried to break,” she said softly. “But I’m still here. And so are you.”

I nodded. I knew she was right, but it didn’t stop my father from invading every thought. She looked me over and tilted her head. I could see a hint of anger smoldering in her amber eyes. I couldn’t tell if it was because of what I told her or if

she knew there was something I hadn't said yet.

"He's going to learn, Serena," she said. "I promise."

And like that, the threat of losing hope was gone. It was that simple when it was just the two of us. I believed her more than I could believe my own mind, and if she thought I would get through this, then I would. I just had to hang on.

I smiled weakly and nodded again, feeling the warmth of her confidence seep into me like medicine.

We both knew that it would take more than a promise to break me out, but it was a good start.

If nothing else, I'd have an ally, and with that ally, I could get the hell out of here.

My determination came rushing back, strong and fast, sweeping away my doubts.

Lila spent the rest of the day with me, making me laugh so much I couldn't help but feel a little better.

She stayed until it was nearly dark, and when she was sure I wouldn't do anything reckless or stupid, she finally left to join the rest of the pack.

I watched the sky get darker and darker until it was black and filled with stars.

And there I was, stuck in my room like a kid on timeout, afraid I'd never leave it. That I would let my father get the best of me and keep me here with his veiled threats and guilt.

That I'd be trapped forever.

I lay down and closed my eyes, forcing myself to sleep.

I twirled a lock of my hair as the memory faded, replaced by the present.

The starkness of my new cell pressed in on me from all sides.

It was cold and bare and exactly what I expected when they locked me up.

My mark burned more sharply here, an ache that pulsed in sync with the mountain's silence.

I didn't know why. But something in this place—something buried deep—was reaching for me.

The walls felt like they were inching in, daring me to last a single day. I knew my father would love to see how long it took before I caved, but I wouldn't give him the satisfaction. This was my life, and he had no say in it. I was getting out of here. I just had to make a plan.

I finally stopped pacing and took a long breath.

The stone beneath my feet wasn't just cold—it was alive.

There was a hum in the walls, so faint I thought I imagined it.

Like the mountain was breathing around me, aware that I didn't belong.

My father was right about one thing. I was marked, but not the way he wanted me to think.

I wasn't going to let his warnings hold me back any longer.

I had to escape and find the truth. No matter what he said, no matter how dangerous he claimed the outside world was, I would do it.

Was he even looking for me anyway? Probably not.

I wasn't a prisoner or a child. I was strong and defiant and ready to face anything that came my way.

I closed my eyes, steadying myself. I was going to get out, and I was going to break this curse if it killed me.

My wolf didn't like this place. It stayed close to the surface, ears pinned, eyes scanning every crack in the stone. Not afraid. Just... alert. As if it knew something I didn't.

The door opened, and a young Stormvale wolf slinked inside like a secret.

I stopped pacing and stared at him, sensing both his sympathy and unease.

He was too young to understand what this place was doing to me, but he was old enough to know I didn't belong here.

I could work with that. If I played my cards right, I could be out and halfway to freedom before anyone noticed I was gone.

"What do you want?" I asked, keeping my voice as smooth and steady as I could manage.

He shifted on his feet, unsure if he should speak or run.

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I didn't give him the chance to decide. "Do you like being your pack's errand boy? A lapdog for Tristan?" I tilted my head and smiled, hoping to crack his resolve.

The young wolf's cheeks reddened, and he looked away. "I came to see if you needed anything," he mumbled.

I held back a laugh. "How thoughtful. You could try setting me free. That might help."

He glanced at the door, then back at me, torn between his loyalty and the allure of rebellion.

"They'll send you away if they catch you in here," I said, my voice dipping low. "You'll end up just like me. A stranger to the pack, locked out, unwanted."

The words landed like stones. I watched him squirm.

"But," I said, drawing it out to reel him back in, "I could owe you one. A big one. That might be worth it, don't you think?"

His eyes darted around the room, looking everywhere but at me. "What kind of favor?" he asked, barely above a whisper.

"The kind that gets you out of trouble," I said, throwing him a lifeline. "A favor from me could come in handy when things start going bad." I let him stew on that for a few beats, watching the gears turn in his head. He was getting close, I could see it. "So what's it going to be?" I asked.

He swallowed hard, and his voice cracked when he spoke. "They'll notice," he said. "The guards."

I waved a hand in the air like I didn't care.

"They've got bigger things to worry about.

The wolves are out for blood." I saw his eyes go wide, and I smiled to myself.

Maybe he wasn't so hard to convince after all.

"Besides, they think I'm weak," I said, playing my last card. "I won't last long out there, right?"

He stared at me for a long moment, then nodded. He didn't want to admit that he was falling for it, but he couldn't help himself.

"You're smarter than they think," I said, sweetening the deal as much as I could. "Do you want to be the kid who sets me free, or the one who never even tried?"

His mouth tightened into a hard line, and he shoved his hands in his pockets. "I'll do it," he said, like he was betraying the whole pack by even saying it. "But you better keep your promise."

"I'm good for it," I said, flashing a grin that I hoped would calm him down.

The young wolf approached my cell and pulled out a ring of keys, hands trembling with nerves.

I kept my eye on the door, ready to put him in front of me as a shield if anyone caught us.

He tried a few keys before finding the right one.

It slid into the lock, and a tremor skittered under my bare feet—not an earthquake, not quite.

More like the mountain itself exhaled, aware of the defiance unfolding in its belly.

Maybe it didn't like traitors. Maybe it didn't like me.

With a soft click of the lock, my heart raced as I heard the bolt turn.

I was closer than I thought. He opened the door just enough for me to slip out, and I caught his eye as I walked past. "Don't look so guilty," I said. "They'll suspect you in a heartbeat."

He nodded, worry etched into his young face. He looked so young—too young to be playing at betrayal. For half a heartbeat, guilt coiled in my gut. But I buried it. This was survival, not kindness. I left him standing there, ducking into the shadows before he could change his mind.

The compound was quiet. Most of the pack was asleep, but I knew there were guards out there somewhere.

I kept to the darkness, staying as low as I could.

The night air was crisp and cool on my skin, sending shivers down my spine as I moved through the open corridors.

The thrill of escape pulsed through me, mingling with a constant undercurrent of fear.

I was close, so close I could almost taste it.

All I had to do was stay one step ahead of the guards.

I paused at a corner, listening for any sign of movement. My senses were on fire, sharper than they'd ever been. Every creak of wood and rustle of leaves seemed magnified. I held my breath, waiting for the right moment to sprint across the clearing and into the cover of trees.

There it was. A shout from the east side of the compound.

I didn't wait to see if it was meant for me.

I dashed forward, my feet silent against the earth, my heart pounding like a wild thing in my chest. I ducked behind a building and leaned against the wall, catching my breath and scanning the area.

No guards. No alarm. I was still safe, at least for now.

I took off again, this time slower, more careful. A single misstep would give me away, and I couldn't risk it. Not after coming this far. I was in the open now, fully exposed and painfully aware of it. I crossed another patch of grass and slipped between two trees, trying to blend into the night.

Another noise caught my attention, and I froze.

A howl pierced the air, long and loud and lonesome.

I could hear other wolves joining in, their voices echoing off the walls of the compound to the sides of the mountains all around us.

It wasn't the sound of a hunt, and it wasn't meant for me.

Not yet. They'd find my empty cell soon enough, but by then I'd be long gone. I hoped.

I crept through the compound, every sense tingling with anticipation.

My eyes adjusted to the darkness, picking out shapes and shadows that I could use as cover.

I spotted a guard to the south, but he didn't see me.

He was preoccupied, staring off into the distance, unaware that I was slipping away right under his nose.

I pushed on, using the commotion of the other wolves as a distraction.

They were restless, just like me. A few lights flickered on, and I ducked behind a pile of crates to avoid being seen.

I couldn't afford any mistakes now, not when I was this close.

The air thickened the deeper I moved through the compound, as though the mountain was reluctant to let me go.

Its magic wasn't loud, but it pressed against me—curious, judging.

When I was sure the coast was clear, I moved again, weaving between buildings and trees like a shadow.

It felt good, this freedom. It felt right.

The way I'd always wanted it to. I was no one's prisoner, and soon I would prove it.

I could almost taste the air outside, crisp and clean and wild. Just a little farther and I'd be free.

I finally reached the outer wall, its edge looming before me like a promise. I took a moment to breathe, to steady my racing heart and clear my mind. This was it. This was my moment.

I glanced over my shoulder one last time, half expecting to see guards rushing toward me, the young wolf pointing and shouting, "There she is!"

But it was just me and the night.

I slipped through a gap in the wall, barely wide enough for my frame, and took off into the open. The forest loomed before me, dark and full of possibilities. I sprinted toward it, my legs pumping and my lungs burning, the scent of pine and freedom filling my senses.

The ground was soft underfoot as I crossed the field, feeling the rush of cold air against my skin. It woke me up, made me alive, made me think I might really be free. It was everything I'd hoped for. I was out. I was gone.

And then it hit me. I didn't know where I was going.

I was free. But freedom without direction was just another kind of prison. I had no home. No pack. No plan. Just the ache of being unclaimed in a world that didn't want me.

The idea landed like a punch in the gut, knocking the wind out of me. I stumbled to a stop, catching myself against a tree and panting for breath. I thought I had a plan. I thought I knew what I was doing. But now, alone and out here in the woods, it was clear how little I understood.

The only thing I knew for sure was that I couldn't go back to Silver Ridge. Not yet. Not ever, if I could help it.

I closed my eyes, steadying myself. The forest stretched out before me, vast and unknown, and I took a step toward it. Then another. My heart slowed, my mind cleared, and I started to run.

This was my chance. I wouldn't let it slip away.

I pushed into the trees, leaving the Stormvale compound behind. The cool night air wrapped around me, filling my lungs and fueling my drive. I had to keep going, to find my own path, to discover the truth about my curse and my fate. I couldn't let anyone hold me back.

Not my father. Not the pack. Not even myself.

The forest opened up around me, and I disappeared into it, a wild thing finally set free.

I ran, the dark woods closing around me like secrets.

I couldn't stop, not when I was finally out, not when I was so close to being free.

My own pack was behind me, but their betrayal was an open wound.

I had to keep going, to find the truth. The real reason for my father's warnings.

Then I saw something. Someone. Up ahead, just beyond the next row of trees.

My heart stuttered, skipping beats and hope.

Had the pack sent someone after me? Was I already caught?

I crouched low, peering through the tangle of branches and leaves.

The figure moved closer, and my pulse quickened.

My mind raced through the possibilities.

I thought about the young wolf and wondered if he'd given me up.

I thought about my father and his cold, unforgiving eyes.

I thought about my other pack members, each one eager to bring me down.

I couldn't let them find me, not yet, not ever.

The trees seemed to close in on me as I backed away.

I had to be careful. It could be a trap, a ploy to draw me out of hiding.

The ground was damp beneath my feet, every snapped twig and crushed leaf a potential alarm.

My breath was loud in my ears, ragged and uneven as I tried to steady myself.

I needed a plan, but all I could think about was running.

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Maybe I wasn't cut out for this. Maybe my father was right, and I'd be back in the cell by morning, tail tucked between my legs. My whole body tensed at the thought. I turned and prepared to bolt, but then I heard something. A voice. A familiar voice that stopped me in my tracks.

"Serena?"

The relief was instant and overwhelming, crashing over me like a wave.

It wasn't anyone from the Stormvale pack.

It wasn't my father. It was Lila. I straightened up, heart still racing, and watched as she came into view.

She was breathless and wild-eyed, but alive and safe and exactly what I needed.

"Serena!" she shouted, her voice cutting through the dark like a beacon.

I stepped out from my hiding place, my chest tight with emotion. "Lila!"

She ran toward me, and we collided in a tangle of arms and laughter and breathless words. It felt good to have someone here with me, to know that I wasn't alone in this. It felt right, the way nothing else had for so long.

"Where the hell have you been, Serena?" Lila's voice was a mixture of relief and frustration, her eyes searching mine for answers. "The pack was in chaos, trying to figure out who took you and where you went."

I took a deep breath, steadying myself before replying, “It was the Stormvale pack in the mountains. I managed to escape, but I need to get out of here. I can’t let them, or my father, find me.

I had to get out, Lila. I couldn't stay there anymore. My father... he was suffocating me with his warnings and secrets. I needed to find the truth about my curse.”

She pulled back just enough to look at me, her eyes bright with questions. “I always knew you’d get out,” she said, her voice full of admiration and something else, something that sounded a lot like worry.

“Not for long if I keep running into people,” I said, trying to sound braver than I felt.

She punched me lightly on the shoulder. “It’s a good thing I found you first, then.” Her eyes darted around the forest, scanning for any signs of danger. “They’ll be following you, Serena. When they find out you’re gone—”

“They won’t,” I said, cutting her off. I wanted to believe it, to let myself think I’d gotten away for good. “Not if I can help it.”

She nodded, her expression fierce and determined. “Then we have to move. It’s not safe here.”

I knew she was right, but I couldn’t bring myself to do it. Not yet. Not without knowing how much she knew. I watched her, waiting for her to say more, hoping she had answers I didn’t. “What about the curse?” I asked, my voice tight with urgency. “Did you find anything?”

Her eyes met mine, and I could see it all there before she even spoke. The truth. The lies. The tangled web I was caught in.

“Serena,” she said, her voice dropping to a whisper. “There’s so much you don’t know.”

I pulled her into a hug, my heart swelling with gratitude and love. She’d done it. She’d really done it.

She clung to me for a long moment before pulling back, her face serious. “Your father is keeping things from you,” she said, her tone low and urgent. “Things he doesn’t want you to find out.”

I felt a sharp pang of anger, hot and bright and familiar. “He’s been doing that my whole life,” I said, trying to keep the bitterness out of my voice. “What’s he hiding now?”

Lila took a deep breath, and her expression was a mix of fear and resolve. “Some sort of stones,” she said. “He’s been trying to get them.”

The stones. The forbidden ones. My father’s obsession, the source of his secrets—and now, maybe, my only answer.

“Why?” I asked, though I already knew the answer.

“The curse,” she said. “He thinks it’s the only way to break it.”

I laughed, a harsh and bitter sound. “And what does he plan to do with me in the meantime?”

She frowned. “He’s scared, Serena. He doesn’t want to lose you.”

I didn’t buy it. Not for a second. “He’s keeping me in the dark so he can have it all for himself. Has he even been looking for me? He’s probably relieved I’m gone, not

his burden anymore.”

Her silence was answer enough.

“Where are the stones?” I asked. I had to know, even if it meant tearing the truth out of my father’s cold, dead hands.

“The Stormvale pack,” Lila said. “He thinks they still have them. I found some old letters—”

“What else did you find?” I asked, cutting her off.

Her eyes softened. “Something about the mark,” she said, nodding toward my wrist. “There was a page missing, but...”

“But what?”

“One line stuck with me,” Lila whispered. “The celestial bond must be broken where it was made—within the stone heart of the wolf’s mountain.” She reached out and gave my shoulder a squeeze. “I think your father’s more scared than you are.”

I didn’t want to believe it. I didn’t want to think he cared, not after everything he’d put me through. But I knew Lila wouldn’t lie. Not to me. Not ever.

She glanced around, the urgency creeping back into her expression. “We need to go. If they catch you—”

“They won’t,” I said, more sure of it than I’d been since leaving the compound. “Not if we find the stones first.”

Lila looked at me, her eyes full of questions. She nodded, and I knew she was with

me, all the way. We were about to move when a noise froze us both in place.

Someone was out there, just beyond the trees. A shadow among shadows, closing in fast.

Lila's grip tightened on my arm. "It's them, Serena," she said, her voice barely a whisper. "They found us."

I strained to see through the dark, my heart hammering in my chest. It wasn't our pack. It wasn't my father. It was something else. Someone else. A strange pressure hit the back of my neck, like the air thickened all at once. Something powerful was coming.

The forest went still. No birds, no wind, no sound—just a sudden hush, as if the trees themselves were holding their breath.

A figure stepped into the clearing, tall and imposing, and I felt a chill run down my spine.

His eyes locked onto mine with an intensity that stirred more than fear.

It was him. The Stormvale alpha. Tristan.

The tension crackled between us, electric and undeniable. He stopped a few paces away, his presence commanding and inescapable. I felt Lila's pulse thudding against my arm. She wouldn't run. But she was scared.

"You're coming back with me," he said, his voice as cold and strong as I remembered.

I glared at him, defiant and unyielding. "I'm not going anywhere with you."

Tristan took a step closer, and I could feel the weight of him, the raw power that clung to him like a shadow. My wolf flinched before I could stop her, a ripple of submissive instinct flashing through me. I hated it. But I felt it.

Lila shifted beside me, her fear almost tangible. I knew she'd fight him if it came to that, but I didn't want her to risk it. Not for me. Not for this.

"You don't have a choice," Tristan said, his eyes never leaving mine.

"Watch me," I said, turning on my heel and pulling Lila with me.

I didn't get far.

He was in front of us before I even realized he'd moved, blocking our path with a speed that made my heart jump. He moved like a predator—silent, controlled, but coiled with barely restrained violence.

The clearing seemed to shrink around him. Even the shadows shifted, bending toward him like he was the center of their gravity. My wolf bristled beneath my skin, half-cowed, half-electrified. He was danger in its purest form—and I couldn't look away.

"This is your last chance, Serena," he said, his voice softer but no less certain. "Come back willingly, or—"

"Or what?" I asked, challenging him with every ounce of strength I had.

"Or I'll make you." His words were a promise, unyielding and absolute.

I could feel Lila trembling beside me, her fear pushing against my resolve. I wanted to stand and fight, to claw and bite my way to freedom, but I didn't know if I could. Not with him. Not like this.

Tristan's eyes bore into me, and for a moment, I saw something there. Something vulnerable and raw. It was gone before I could place it, replaced by his usual steely determination.

"You can't keep me locked up," I said, trying to ignore the way his presence affected me.

"I can," he said, stepping closer, "and I will."

His nearness made it hard to think, hard to breathe. I wanted to push him away, but I wanted to pull him closer. The confusion and anger twisted inside me, leaving me off-balance and exposed.

Then he reached for me, and everything changed.

His hand closed around my wrist, and the world exploded into light. Our birthmarks glowed with a magical, sparkling iridescent energy, bright and blinding in the dark of the forest. I gasped, and I could feel him do the same.

It was a connection I couldn't explain, couldn't understand, but it was there. Pulsing between us. It was beautiful. Terrifying. I hated that part of me didn't want to let go.

The earth beneath us gave a low, echoing thrum—like the Stormvale mountain itself had felt the mark awaken. The leaves stilled. The air grew heavy with something old, watching.

I pulled my wrist away, and the light faded. The night rushed back in, filling the space with a heavy silence. Tristan stared at me, his usual confidence shattered by what had just happened. His jaw tightened, but something flickered in his eyes. Not fear. Not anger. Something like awe.

We were both stunned, both speechless. I didn't know what it meant, but I knew it was important. More important than anything I'd ever faced.

Lila was the first to find her voice. "What the hell was that?" she asked, her eyes wide with shock.

I didn't have an answer. I wasn't sure I wanted one.

Tristan took a deep breath, his expression shifting from surprise to something else. Something like hope. "Come back with me," he said, and this time it wasn't a demand. It was a plea. The alpha facade cracked for a second. Just a second. And I saw the man underneath.

I looked at Lila, at the forest, at my wrist where the light had been. There was too much to figure out, too much I didn't understand. I needed answers.

"Serena," Lila said, her voice steady and supportive. "It's up to you."

I hesitated, weighing the risks and the promises and the unknowns.

Going back to a rival pack's compound was dangerous, but it might be the only way to find out what was happening.

To learn the truth about the curse and Tristan and everything that had been hidden from me.

I didn't trust the mountain. But I trusted the way his voice steadied the chaos in mine.

"I'll come back," I said finally, my words surprising even me. "But you don't own me, Tristan."

He nodded, a small smile playing at the corners of his mouth. “We’ll see about that.”

Lila hugged me tight, her eyes telling me she’d be there, no matter what. She slipped something into my hand, closing my fingers around it before I could see what it was. “Just in case,” she said, her expression fierce and full of promise.

Then she was gone, disappearing into the night, leaving me alone with the alpha.

Tristan’s gaze met mine, the connection between us as strong as it was confusing. “Ready?” he asked, and it wasn’t a question.

I didn’t answer, but I took a step toward him.

I had to know. I had to find out.

No matter the cost. Because deep down, I already knew—I wasn’t walking into a prison. I was walking into fate’s fire, and something inside me was ready to burn.

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### Chapter four

#### Tristan

S erena's skin had been fire under my touch, a searing confirmation that left me reeling as we reached the mountain compound. My pack watched, their suspicion a palpable scent as we crossed the stone gates. Inside, moonlight filtered through crystal skylights, the air heavy with pine and sage...and something deeper, like the mountain exhaled secrets it had buried for centuries. She didn't belong here, and yet I couldn't bring myself to put her back in that cell.

My birthmark tingled where it met hers. The mark flared beneath my skin—not painfully, but insistently, like it was waking up.

It felt like a question, the kind you can't un-ask.

The revelation haunted me as I led her deeper into our stronghold, through the ancient corridors carved directly into the mountainside.

Stone pillars loomed overhead, etched with symbols of our lineage, wolf insignias guarding the path.

The runes shimmered subtly as we passed, like they were catching moonlight that wasn't there.

The mountain's energy had changed. Not loud.

Not angry. But aware. As if it, too, recognized her.

I should have returned her to the dim confinement where the rest of her pack languished, where she would pose no risk to us or herself.

But something in me balked at the thought.

I knew her father, Alaric, the alpha of the Silver Ridge pack.

And I knew the rumors about how he treated his daughter.

A long shadow cast by obligation stretched before me. As a formidable alpha, I suddenly found myself unsure. Unsettled. I could hear the whispers ripple through my pack like a gust of winter wind. They did not trust her. They wondered why I did. As did I.

Her footsteps were soft but unyielding behind me, echoing through the stone passages.

I stole a glance back at her, catching the glint of her fiery hair in the moonlight—a living flame, too wild to be snuffed out.

Her hazel eyes caught mine with a knowing intensity.

I turned away, my resolve slipping like sand through my fingers.

She was fire in a place carved of earth and stone—wrong, or right in ways I didn't yet understand.

In my private chambers, I watched Serena's eyes take in the room.

They were drawn with a curiosity that matched my own toward her.

I could almost hear the pack's murmurs through the thick stone walls.

They would think I was compromised. Weak.

The space around us seemed to shrink under the weight of our silence, charged and volatile.

“You've moved me up in the world, I see.” Her voice cut through the tension, sharp and ironic. She traced her fingers along the wooden frame of the bed—a gesture so casual it felt almost intimate.

“Don't get used to it,” I said, more gruffly than intended. I turned to the broad window, its crystal panes like the eyes of some indifferent god. Moonlight spilt over us, too bright and too cold.

“And here I thought you were starting to like me.” Her words dripped with sarcasm, but beneath it, I heard something more. Was it doubt? Hope?

“Why are you doing this?” she pressed. I could feel her eyes boring into my back, burning hotter than before.

Because I'm a fool, I thought. Instead, I said, “You're more use to me alive and talking than silent in a cell.”

A flicker of something—was it pain? anger?—crossed her face, but she quickly masked it with a sly smile. “Sounds like your version of sweet talk, Alpha.”

I looked at her then, truly looked, and was startled by the pull I felt toward this woman whose very existence threatened all I had sworn to protect. “You shouldn't be

here, Serena.”

“Too bad. Looks like I'm stuck with you.” She twirled a lock of her hair, an almost nervous gesture that betrayed her defiance. My wolf prowled under my skin, pacing. Claim. Protect. Destroy. The urges warred, primal and loud, refusing to be silenced. “Or are you the one who's stuck?” she laughed.

The words echoed through me, lodging somewhere deep. She couldn't possibly know how right she was. My eyes fell to her wrist, to the mark I now knew was like my own. Its crescent shape seemed to taunt me, daring me to understand what I refused to.

I was on dangerous ground. More dangerous than my pack could fathom.

Serena, cursed and cast out, was supposed to be a pawn in this ancient game, not the player who threatened the board itself.

If she was truly the one bound to the mark—then I was standing on a knife's edge between salvation and annihilation.

A wrong move, a wrong choice, and the mountain might not forgive me.

No. I had to silence the thought. I could not afford to believe it. I could not risk believing it.

But with each moment she stayed, with each breath she took in my world, I felt the pull of her destiny weaving tighter around me, a knot I was not sure I wanted to untie.

I left her standing in the center of my chamber—a wildfire in a stone temple, too bright, too dangerous. As the door clicked shut behind me, I realized the sanctuary had gone silent again. But it was a different silence. The kind that settles before

something shatters.

I headed for the ancient caves deep beneath the compound, deep enough where Serena's scent could no longer penetrate my senses.

I needed to breathe. I needed to speak to Morrigan, the pack's seer.

Pushing deeper into the caves, I could smell the herbs and spices she was known for, and I knew I was getting closer.

The air grew thick and strange in Morrigan's chamber, as if time bent and buckled around me.

Dried herbs swayed from the ceiling, casting long shadows on the walls.

The heavy scent of sage clung to my lungs, leaving a ghost of prophecy with every breath.

She appeared from nowhere, like an apparition in her own haunted chamber, violet eyes searching me with a knowing that cut too deep.

"You are troubled, Alpha," Morrigan said, her voice like wind through hollow bones. It was neither question nor statement, but something more potent—a glimpse.

"Tell me what you see." My words came out rough, barely cutting through the thickness of the air. "What is this about the girl?"

She stepped closer, her movements fluid and slow, as if choreographed by the cosmos themselves. The deep violet of her eyes never wavered, unsettling in their focus. "The girl with the matching mark. You know who she is."

“I don’t know anything,” I said, the admission tasting bitter on my tongue. “But when I touched her... something happened.”

The air around us vibrated, charged with a silent anticipation.

I pushed back my shirt, exposing the birthmark on the back my shoulder.

Its pale crescent shape and stars stood out against my tan skin, a reminder that pulsed with uncertainty.

I felt Morrigan's eyes on it, then on me, her gaze so intense it seemed to bore into the truth I couldn't yet see.

“And hers is the same?” Her voice was a careful weave of disbelief and understanding, threading the line between them with expert precision.

“When we touched, they glowed.” I searched her face, hoping for a sliver of clarity in her inscrutable expression. “Tell me what it means.”

A smile tugged at her lips, more haunting than reassuring.

She circled me, each step deliberate, an orbit of wisdom and mystery.

Her fingers brushed the air near my mark, as if she could feel the energy sparking from it.

“You are linked to the celestial, Tristan. Your bond was written long before you drew breath.”

Her words struck like a chill in my spine, sending shards of revelation through me. The prophecy was real. It wasn't a whisper of old wolves, but something that breathed

and lived, wrapping itself around my world with each moment she spoke.

“Celestial?” I echoed, my voice trailing after the thought like a lost shadow.

“The moon has marked you, both of you. Not as a curse, but a protection,” Morrigan said, her tone dipping into something softer, almost tender.

Protection. The word hung between us, alien and familiar at once. Was that what this was? Not a chain, but a shield? A way to keep the world at bay until she found her way to me, her supposed counterpart?

“You speak in riddles, Morrigan.” My frustration was a living thing, my wolf straining against its tether. “Is it true? Is she...?”

She leaned in, her hair silver in the dim light, the lines of her face etched with age and agelessness. “Fated. Cursed with unrest until she finds her mate. Until she found you.”

The chamber seemed to narrow around us, its weight oppressive with the enormity of what she suggested. The girl who was supposed to bring ruin to my pack, to be nothing more than leverage in this ancient vendetta, was destined for me?

I stepped back, reeling from the impact. “And what about my pack? What does this mean for them?”

Morrigan's smile faded, replaced by a look of deep contemplation. Her voice dropped to a whisper, one I felt rather than heard. “A gift for her, a burden for you. The stars align, but their light is sharp.”

Her words left marks of their own, ones I couldn't hide under clothes or duty. The risk was greater than I could have imagined. It wasn't just my heart on the line but the

heart of the pack, the essence of what we were. The thought was terrifying. Exhilarating.

“Tristan,” Morrigan called, drawing me back from the edge of my own spiraling thoughts. “What is in you cannot be undone.”

The room was closing in, her truths an avalanche of stardust and prophecy, burying the doubts I wanted to cling to. I needed air. I needed time. But time was a luxury that felt as fleeting as the shadow of a passing moon.

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Morrigan turned and motioned for me to follow, leading me through an opening concealed by shadows which led to a long passage.

Each step echoed with the past, relentless and haunting.

Morrigan's presence was the only tether to now, a specter with roots sunk into the marrow of time itself. The dark and narrow tunnel seemed to go on forever, until we reached a chamber so ancient it felt like we walked inside the mountain's very soul.

Runic symbols glowed faintly on the walls, pulsing in time with my heart.

They told a story of stones that fell from the heavens, of a betrayal older than memory.

I followed her deeper into the chamber, the walls narrowing and the air heavy with secrets too vast to comprehend. Crystal formations jutted from the ground, casting spectral lights that danced with our movements.

She gestured to the runes that adorned the walls, each symbol alive with its own eerie glow. "Do you see, Tristan? This is where your fate was forged, where it begins and ends."

I reached out, my fingers brushing the surface of each rock. They were cool, electric, a living history that jolted me with every touch. "Tell me," I said, my voice swallowed by the vastness of the space.

"Centuries ago, these stones fell from the sky," Morrigan began, her words weaving a

tapestry of cosmic consequence. “A gift from the lunar eclipse, meant to empower those who would honor them.”

“The Stormvale wolves,” I murmured, piecing together the fragments of a story I’d known only as a bedtime fairytale.

She nodded, the light flickering over her silver hair. “Yes. Embedded within this mountain, they became the source of your pack’s strength and its bond to the celestial.”

“And Serena’s ancestors?” I pressed, feeling the knot of destiny tighten around me.

“Entrusted with the secret, sworn to protect it. But greed... betrayal... led to the curse that haunts her bloodline. They stole the stones, and for that they paid the price.”

The enormity of it settled in, a mantle I was unprepared to bear. “They were cast out,” I said, understanding now the depths of the legacy that bound us.

“Their betrayal severed the trust. But not the power.” Morrigan’s eyes locked onto mine, charged with the full weight of prophecy.

“The birthmarks you share mark you as the pair foretold. The ones who can mend what was broken. These stones have quietly fueled the mountain’s power, and your pack, for centuries. They were dormant...until she arrived.”

“There has to be a way to free her,” I said, my voice cracking with frustration. “Tell me how.”

Morrigan stepped closer, placing a cold hand over my mark. “The answer lies not in magic, but memory. Love will guide you to the wound—but blood must pay the toll.”

“Whose blood?”

Her silence filled the chamber more than any wind could.

A chill passed through me, cold and searing at once. My mind spun with the implications, each one a thread pulling me further into a web I couldn't escape. “Morrigan, tell me,” I demanded, my thoughts slipping into the fear I dared not voice.

She hesitated, and in that moment I saw the truth she hadn't yet spoken. “To free her is to risk all you know. The mountain's gifts come with a cost, Tristan. Keep the curse, and it will devour you both from the inside out,” Morrigan warned. “Break it, and you will be free.”

“You told me I had to find the cursed wolf who could ruin this pack, and that I would find a mate. You didn't tell me they would both be the same person,” I shot out.

My heart thundered in my chest, a storm of emotion I could barely contain.

The bond I felt with Serena was real, as tangible as the stone beneath my fingers, but so too was the duty I had to my pack.

They had relied on me, trusted me. How could I choose between them and the woman whose touch lit a fire I could not quench?

They would never accept an enemy in our ranks.

“You have feelings for her,” Morrigan said, the accusation gentle and undeniable.

“I don't have the luxury of feelings,” I snapped, though my own words sounded hollow.

“But you do.” Morrigan’s gaze softened, and in it I saw an understanding that cut to the quick of me. “Your soul bent toward hers like the moon bends the tides. The mountain felt it. I felt it.”

The truth. It was a concept that felt as slippery as the future I once thought was certain. Every second spent in this chamber stripped away my certainties, leaving only raw need and fear.

A quiet filled the space, a silence rich with consequence. It was a silence I knew well, the same one that had settled over me when I left Serena standing in my room, the silence of an unspoken question too large to answer.

I turned to leave, the weight of prophecy trailing like shadows. Morrigan’s voice stopped me cold, her final words a chilling whisper that cut to the bone. “Beware the betrayer who walks among your ranks, Alpha. One of your most trusted seeks to claim the stones for himself.”

A fresh surge of fear gripped me, mingling with doubt. “Who?” I demanded, but the question was futile.

Her eyes, clear and ancient, gave no answer.

“If the stones are stolen...” Morrigan hesitated, “If your enemies wield them first...then the curse will become a weapon. You won’t just lose your pack.

You’ll lose the balance of everything. The mountain will scream, and no one will survive its rage.

The moon will soon be full, and choices must be made. ”

I turned, leaving her standing in the center of her chamber like the eye of some

cosmic storm. Her eyes followed me, piercing and eternal, and I knew she saw more than she said. She always did.

As I walked from the chamber, the urgency of her warning pressed in on me from all sides.

Someone within the pack sought to fulfill an ambition that could undo everything.

The full moon, the time when my power and my vulnerability would be greatest, was coming fast. I could feel its approach like the tide, pulling me toward decisions I wasn't ready to make.

Morrigan's words echoed long after I left. "One of your most trusted..." Ewan's voice rang in my memory, sharp with challenge, with fear. I shook my head. No. It couldn't be him... could it?

The mountain's heartbeat pulsed beneath my feet. The full moon was coming. So was the reckoning.

### Chapter five

Serena

The mountain doesn't sleep. And neither do I.

I was drifting before I even closed my eyes.

Sleep took me not like a lullaby, but like a riptide—pulling me down fast, without warning, without breath.

One moment, I was staring at the ceiling above Tristan's bed, wondering why he'd left me there alone.

The next, I was standing barefoot on cold stone, surrounded by silver light and silence so deep it hummed.

The air shimmered with frost, though no wind stirred. The walls rose high and curved like ribs, etched with glowing runes that pulsed in time with my heartbeat. No— not mine. Something older. Wilder.

I reached for my wrist. My mark burned cold.

The crescent moon and stars shimmered just beneath the skin, not ink or scar but light—alive and watching. I opened my mouth to speak, but no sound came. The silence swallowed me whole.

A figure stepped out of the darkness ahead. A woman. Tall, robed in shadows that flowed like ink across the stone. Her hair was copper fire, wild and loose, and when she turned, I felt something lurch inside me.

She had my face .

Older. Hollowed out. Tired in the way only wolves cursed for too long could ever be.

“You found him,” she said—not surprised, not kind. Just... resigned.

I tried to move, to speak, but my body didn’t obey. I was rooted. Watching. Dreaming.

Her eyes—my eyes—swept over me like judgment. “But finding him is not the end. It’s only the test.”

Behind her, the walls bled light. Runes flashed faster. Symbols I couldn’t read burned themselves into my memory: a broken moon, a star pierced with thorns, a circle undone.

She stepped closer.

“You want to break the curse?” she whispered. “Then listen.”

A low howl echoed through the chamber. It wasn’t Tristan’s voice—but it felt like it belonged to him. Wounded. Angry. Alone.

The woman reached for my wrist, her fingers brushing mine. When she touched my mark, everything ignited .

Visions slammed through me like lightning: blood on ancient stone, two wolves

back-to-back howling into a sky split with fire, a hand reaching— failing —to catch another before they were pulled into the dark.

Stones, glowing, pulsing—cracking. A silver dagger falling from someone's hands.

A voice: “One must choose. One must lose.” When the dagger hit the stone, something in me shattered too.

A warning. A promise. I just didn't know which.

“No,” I tried to say. “No, I won't choose that.”

The woman only tilted her head, sad and unflinching. “You already have.”

The chamber shuddered like the mountain itself was waking. Cracks bloomed beneath our feet, and the wind began to scream.

“Serena! ”

The voice wasn't hers.

It was his .

I jerked upright in bed, gasping. My skin was damp with sweat, the sheets twisted around my legs. My heart was a drum in my chest, and the mark on my wrist—gods, it burned . I pulled it close to my chest, as if I could hold the magic in, keep the memory from slipping away.

But it was already fading. Only fragments remained.

A woman with my face.

A voice saying, “One must choose. One must lose.”

And Tristan.

Always Tristan.

I turned, half expecting him to be standing there, watching from the shadows.

But the room was empty.

And I was alone.

Again.

After waking up alone in his room, I’d spent half the day wandering the mountain compound like some awkward stray someone forgot to leash.

The place was bigger than I expected: winding stone halls that whispered old magic, rooms carved into the bones of the mountain, and too many curious stares from the wolves who clearly hadn’t decided if I was a guest, a prisoner, or a threat they should’ve already dealt with.

By the time I finally caught up with Tristan, I was cranky, starving, and about two seconds away from punching the next person who asked if I was lost.

He didn’t look surprised to see me. Just tired. But not in the same way as before. Something in his expression had shifted—less rigid, more... open. Maybe it was the way his eyes softened when they landed on me. Or the fact that, for once, he didn’t greet me like a challenge he needed to shut down.

“You hungry?” he asked, his voice rough like gravel.

“Starving,” I replied, arms crossed but voice gentler than I meant it to be. “You planning to throw me in the dungeon after dessert or...?”

His mouth twitched, not quite a smile. “Dinner first. Then we’ll see.”

I rolled my eyes, but before I could follow up with something scathing, he said, “Come on. I’ll show you around first.”

And just like that, the alpha who chained me up yesterday was offering me a personal tour.

He paused near a torch bracket carved with ancient runes, fingers brushing the stone like it grounded him.

His jaw clenched, just for a second, before the alpha mask slid back into place.

The halls gave way to the open air, and I blinked against the sudden flood of late light.

The wind here smelled of moss and smoke, tinged with the faintest spice of wolfsbane and pine.

For the first time in days, I wasn’t cold.

The Stormvale compound wasn’t just stone and strategy—it breathed .

The outer terraces were wide and open, carved into the mountain itself, with jagged cliff views on one side and forest stretching endlessly on the other.

We passed small courtyards where wolves trained with blades and others gathered near the barracks, laughter spilling from their lungs like they didn’t have enemies just

beyond the trees.

Like war hadn't carved itself into their spines.

Then we reached the edge of a wide clearing, where firelight licked the air and ash drifted between conversations.

Wolves were everywhere—lounging, sparring, laughing, living .

Some sat by the fire with mugs in hand, others wrestled like overgrown pups in the dirt.

Children darted between the legs of the adults, shrieking with joy, while a few of the rougher warriors took turns sparring near the flames.

I paused, watching.

Tristan didn't rush me.

“Shouldn't you be showing them who's boss?” I asked, nodding toward a particularly brutal takedown that left one of the younger men groaning on his back in the dust.

Tristan glanced that way and gave a lazy shrug. “They know who the alpha is.”

A beat. Then he looked back at me and winked .

I snorted before I could stop myself, warmth curling at the edges of my ribs. “Cocky much?”

“Confident,” he corrected. “It's different.”

I watched him for a moment longer, taking in the way the firelight played across the hard angles of his face.

He didn't bark orders or loom to intimidate—but everyone looked at him with the same mix of respect and loyalty I'd never seen in my own pack.

He was dangerous, yes. But there was something else, too.

He belonged here. Not because he ruled by fear, but because they trusted him.

And maybe that was what shook me the most. It was a stark contrast to the iron rule of my father.

I looked away before my thoughts turned traitorous.

“You could've locked me back up,” I said quietly. “But you didn't.”

He didn't respond immediately. Then, “No. I didn't.”

Just that. No explanation, no demand for thanks. It hit harder than any threat.

We stood at the edge of the firelight for a breath longer, shoulder to shoulder. Then he tilted his head toward the hall.

His eyes met mine, and his face did that infuriating alpha thing—half amused, half “get ready to have a bad time.” He opened his mouth, and I braced myself for something cocky or infuriating.

Instead, he extended an arm. “Ready?” he asked.

The word was both a question and a challenge, floating in the space between us.

I blinked, actually caught off guard. Then I shifted my expression back to default sarcasm. “Well, aren’t you the gentleman,” I said. I slipped my arm through his before he could withdraw it, half-expecting to catch it halfway back to his side. It stayed right where it was. Damn him.

He led me away from the fire and toward the noisy, warm light of the dining hall. “Everyone’s curious about our guest,” he said, looking sideways at me. “Figured it’d be better if I walked you in instead of letting Ewan drag you kicking and screaming.”

“That was thoughtful,” I said. “In a suspiciously uncharacteristic way.” My gaze stayed straight ahead, but I felt him watching me, like he was taking mental notes or some kind of inventory. My hand twitched toward my hair again.

We paused at the entrance, the sound of clinking plates and clattering voices pouring out into the corridor. Tristan’s arm tensed under my hand. “You’ll be fine,” he said, like I was the one who needed reassurance. The nerve. “It’s just dinner.”

I made a face like he had just suggested torture. “If this is some kind of elaborate plan to get me to confess all my pack’s secrets over dessert, you’re going to be disappointed.”

He smirked. “Let’s call it a diplomatic mission, then.” Before I could shoot back, he pulled me into the dining hall.

It was a universe away from the icy, uncomfortable meals back home.

I had to keep my jaw from dropping like I’d never seen a room with a bunch of tables before.

People sat crammed together, talking and laughing like they actually liked each other.

The air smelled like heaven on a plate—roasted meat and fresh bread, spicy cider and something sweet.

I watched a woman ruffle the hair of the man next to her and got an uninvited pang of envy.

String lights were hung back and forth between the exposed wooden beams above, casting a warm glow over the cozy dining hall.

“Well, this is...quaint,” I managed to get out.

“Hey now, don’t mock mountain living,” Tristan joked as he shoved his elbow into my side.

“I’m not,” I laughed. “This is just a lot more...family fun than I’m used to.”

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“Well maybe I can help you get used to it,” he replied as he met my gaze, which almost made me weak in the knees.

What the hell was that?

Tristan led me to the front, his grip on my arm just short of claiming. Every few steps, I felt eyes land on us. On me. Conversations dropped to a low hum, curiosity spiking in the air.

He stopped us at the head table, letting go of my arm so fast I almost stumbled. “This is Serena,” he said, ignoring the obvious fact that every soul in the room was already gawking at me like a circus attraction. I squared my shoulders and resisted the urge to flip them all off.

No one spoke for a second, and then a red-haired guy grinned at me from across the table. “Is she under duress?” he asked, mock-concerned. Tristan sent him a look that was not as amused as it could have been.

“This is Bram,” Tristan said. “Don’t listen to a word he says.”

Bram gave a wounded expression. “You have to be so careful with the rival packs these days, especially an alpha’s daughter,” he said. “They’re always stealing things, like our pack members or our alpha’s heart.”

Before I could decide how to answer that, Tristan nudged me toward a tall woman with a long black braid, ignoring Bram’s comment completely. “Renna. Our top hunter.”

Renna tilted her head. “Good luck out there, Silver Ridge,” she said with an approving smile that didn’t entirely hide the skepticism. “Make sure you watch your back.”

“I have to,” I said, pretending to sound wounded. “It’s such a nice one.”

A few of the pack members laughed. Bram held up his drink and looked at me like we were old pals. “And she’s funny!” he declared. “I like this one, Alpha. Can we keep her?”

“No promises,” Tristan said.

A dozen more faces flashed in front of me, too fast for me to remember names or roles, but Tristan seemed to want me to meet everyone in the universe.

Every introduction came with a warm touch on my back that made my skin tingle and my head spin in a way I really, really didn’t want to think about.

Every time I told myself I was imagining things, that the gestures meant nothing, and that this was all some sneaky trick.

He finally guided me into a seat, sitting beside me like he might need to fend off his wolves at any second. Maybe he did. Maybe I did.

We watched the pack fill in around us, and I realized my face hurt from trying to hold a smile. There was so much damn cheer everywhere. It was a physical presence, crowding around me like another opponent.

Tristan leaned close enough that I caught the dark, woodsy smell of him. “How’s it going over there?” he asked, like I was on some remote island of civilization. “Surviving?”

I studied the crowded tables. All that warmth, all that energy. I didn't know what to do with it. "You think this is going to break me?" I asked. "Nice try, but I've survived worse."

"Yeah," he said, and there was an unfamiliar softness in his voice. "I know."

I didn't belong here. I didn't belong anywhere, but here was especially not where I belonged. I glanced at Tristan, then tried to act like I wasn't watching every move he made.

More of the pack settled into the tables, loud and careless and happy.

It was a sight I'd never seen before: a room full of people, at ease with each other.

Like the entire world wasn't out to get them.

Even if it was, no one seemed worried about it.

They passed platters and poured drinks, touching shoulders and whispering jokes.

I wondered if this was what Tristan was used to, and what he was doing keeping around a cursed outsider like me.

He laughed at something Bram said, looking so much a part of this universe it was hard to imagine he was the same alpha who'd thrown me in a cell and changed the entire course of my life.

Not that I was imagining anything, of course.

I tried not to stare, but the more I tried, the more it happened anyway.

He reached for a bowl of mashed potatoes and I caught myself being jealous of a starch.

Two little kids raced past, ducking under tables and giggling while their parents watched with mild amusement.

The room vibrated with the sounds of voices and laughter, so different from what I was used to it felt like being dropped on another planet.

Back home, we ate in silence within our own homes, a thousand unwritten rules keeping us as far from each other as we could be while sitting at the same table.

Here, there was no distance at all. It was terrifying.

A girl across the room shrieked as a hunter held a fish in her face, gesturing with wild enthusiasm. The old man next to them tried to one-up his story, waving his fork for emphasis. More laughter. More food. More drinks. More of everything.

I watched the way the Stormvale wolves moved and talked, like they had no secrets to hide or betrayals to worry about.

And maybe they didn't, which was more foreign to me than any other part of it.

I reached for a platter, unsure if it was okay to take anything. Uncertainty wasn't a feeling I liked.

Tristan noticed my hesitation, smirking a little as he scooped mashed potatoes and meat onto a plate, setting it in front of me before I could stop him. I felt a flash of annoyance, and then something else. Something I refused to name.

I was just about to tell him to keep his distance and his help when Ewan made an

impressive show of sitting as far away from me as he could. I couldn't tell if his glare or his hair was redder. "Someone's eager to impress the guest," he said, drawing out the last word like it was a disease.

"It's cute, right?" I said, keeping my voice light. I shoveled mashed potatoes into my mouth like I didn't care. "Maybe if I stay long enough, he'll carry my books home from school."

Ewan stabbed at a slice of meat, his fork almost bending under the effort. "Guests leave eventually," he said, leaning back in his chair and folding his arms. "Hostages are different."

I felt a hot ripple of eyes on me. Tristan's hand gripped his drink so hard I thought it might shatter. "She's our guest, Ewan," he said, each word a punch in the air.

"Right, and all we have to do is forget she's an enemy alpha's daughter and was raised in rival territory her whole life," he spat back.

"Ewan!" Tristan growled. "That's enough."

Ewan grinned and held up his hands in surrender. "Whatever you say, Alpha." But he looked right at me when he said it, like we both knew it wasn't Tristan's call.

A kid at the next table dropped a plate. The crash felt more like a challenge than an accident.

The minute the broken plate hit the floor, Ewan was back at it, hitting harder and meaner than before. "So," he said, his voice bright with pretend curiosity. "Is it just a coincidence you ended up in our care?"

I smirked, refusing to let him get under my skin. "The last guy who underestimated

me got his ass kicked.” The rest of the pack stopped pretending not to listen, eyes flicking from me to Tristan and back again.

“Ewan,” Tristan growled as a warning. His voice was cold and sharp, like he was trying to slice through the tension.

Ewan raised his eyebrows at me, ignoring the Alpha completely. “Not a very tidy coincidence, though. How convenient that the alpha’s daughter ends up here, safe and sound.”

I felt Tristan start to stand, his anger wrapping around me like an unexpected shield. “Back. Off.”

But I was faster, cutting him off before he could intervene. “I can handle this,” I said, my voice low and determined. I met Ewan’s stare, defiance flaring in my chest. “Besides, if the runt of the litter has something to say, he should say it.”

The red-haired beta folded his arms and let out a huff. “Go ahead then, Silver Ridge. Handle it.”

The rest of the pack watched us, and I saw doubt start to creep into a few faces. I wasn’t the only one wondering where my loyalties lay.

“I get it,” I said, louder now. I put the slightest tremor of a laugh in my voice. “You’re threatened because your pack never had a guest with better hair.”

Some of them snorted with laughter, the sound jagged in the tense air. Ewan didn’t laugh.

“You might not think this is funny,” he said, his voice hardening.

“But your Alpha might, I’m sure he’d love to hear about it after he storms this place to steal our damn property again.

Rumor is he’s planning a move against our pack.

Now you show up here and we’re not supposed to be suspicious at all? ”

Tristan’s hand fell to the table with a hard, frustrated thud. His eyes burned into Ewan. But his focus slid to me as he waited for my next move.

I made sure I was looking right at Ewan when I spoke. “You do remember it was your pack who kidnapped me, right? I don’t recall voluntarily being tied up with wolfsbane-laced ropes or thrown into a cell.”

Ewan let out a displeased grunt in response as his focus shifted to Tristan.

“Not so sure of yourselves now, are you?” I continued. “So desperate for intel you’re starting to sweat?” I set down my drink, keeping my hand steady and my eyes locked on him.

“We’re not the ones who should be sweating.” Ewan’s voice held a mean little bite, ready to sink in. “If we catch even the slightest whiff of betrayal—”

I leaned back, cutting him off again. “For the record, I have nothing to do with my father or the politics of my pack. Where did you hear that rumor, anyway? About my father?”

The rest of the pack was dead silent. I felt the eyes, the doubts, the tension crackling through the room like lightning.

Bram cleared his throat. “Whoa, hey. Is this the part where we have to pick sides?

Because I was promised a nice relaxing meal.” He chuckled nervously, trying to steer us out of choppy waters.

Ewan’s gaze stayed glued to me, his smile widening with a trace of malice. “Doesn’t matter,” he said. “Your pack is living it up rich in the city, while we’re just trying to survive out here in the mountains and defend what’s ours. Maybe Daddy doesn’t want you back, afterall.”

My skin prickled, and I turned toward the entrance of the dining hall. I had a dozen retorts ready, but swallowed them. Let them think I was done talking. It would be more fun when they realized I wasn’t.

A tall figure walked in, a jagged scar running down one side of his face, and I was frozen in place. I knew that scar. I knew who gave it to him, and why. My heart started kicking in my chest like it had a grudge.

The room froze as he made his way to the center. “The Silver Ridge Alpha sends his regards,” he said, eyes fixed Tristan. “And a message: return what belongs to him, or prepare for war.”

I tried to read his expression, but all I could see was determination and bruises. I was surprised to see him in one piece. Alaric didn’t usually send broken soldiers to deliver threats.

No one moved as the emissary stood there, waiting. They didn’t even pretend not to be looking at me.

“An answer,” the scarred man continued, his voice gaining strength. “By morning.” The way he said it with all the weight of the threat and everything else he left unsaid, made me feel it wasn’t just me he was demanding back.

The air in the room was so heavy I could hardly breathe. The minute he turned to leave, the silence broke into chaos.

“That’s a little harsh for a dinner invitation,” Bram said, trying to bring the temperature back down to lukewarm.

Ewan ignored him. He looked at me like he’d known all along, like this was the nail in my coffin and he was happy to pound it in. “Somebody didn’t get the memo about playing nice.”

“That’s what I call a two-for-one threat,” Renna said. “Not subtle, but effective.”

Tristan was the only one not talking. The way he looked at me—serious and questioning and a thousand other things—told me more than words could have. He was trying to figure out what his answer would be. Maybe I was too.

“Does the Alpha expect the answer to come wrapped up with a bow?” Ewan said. “Or is he assuming his little package will be home in time to unwrap it herself?”

The comment got to me more than it should have. The words cut, sharper than I wanted to let on.

“We can’t trust her,” another voice piped up. It didn’t matter whose. The whole room was suddenly full of opinions and arguments, voices swirling around me in a dizzying spiral. The only ones not adding to it were Tristan and me.

It was a world away from the first, awkward pause when I’d walked in with the alpha. But the weight of all those stares on me, waiting for an answer I didn’t know if I could give, felt exactly the same.

I took a breath and said nothing, feeling everything and everyone start to close in.

### Chapter six

#### Tristan

After the chaos at dinner, I made sure a private bedroom was set up for Serena and headed to my own chambers for some air.

The scent of pine smoke greeted me as I shut the door.

I paused for a moment, listening. The distant howls of my pack filtered up from the forest below as they raced restlessly into the night, but no footsteps echoed in the hall.

Good. I turned the key in the lock, and the old iron groaned like it disapproved of my need to be alone.

I didn't care. Tonight, privacy mattered more than the usual display of strength. The mountain air that seeped in through the window carried a faint shimmer of something older than scent—an undercurrent of silver and stone, as if the mountain itself was breathing through the cracks. Shadows danced across the stone walls, thrown by the flickering light of a single oil lamp. The room felt different. Smaller. Like its silence was heavier than it had been before Serena and her damn birthmark. I settled into the worn leather chair near the hearth, but the tension didn't leave my body.

It clung to me as stubbornly as the memory of her startled eyes, the way her mark lit up when I touched her wrist. That moment.

That fucking moment was all I could think about, even when I didn't want to.

She was supposed to be a tool, but now the tool was making me feel like the fool.

I couldn't even get the upper hand without being reminded of the iridescent glow that surged from her wrist to my shoulder. I leaned forward, elbows on my knees, and buried my face in my hands. This wasn't like me.

Losing control, losing focus. Letting something—or someone—interfere with what had always been the most important thing.

I ran a hand through my dark hair, feeling the weight of everything that had happened.

The kidnapping had been a gamble, a way to draw the Silver Ridge pack out, to make them vulnerable.

Now, with Serena in our hold, nothing was going as planned.

She was supposed to be a pawn, but the second our marks connected, that went to shit.

Now her father sends threats to get her back, but I know she doesn't want to return to her own pack who treated her like a prisoner. What the hell was I going to do?

I exhaled and listened to the fire crackle. It mixed with the low sound of my pack in the distance, howls winding through the trees like a living, breathing thing. It had a pulse. The same kind I felt every time I saw Serena, the way her eyes challenged me, her fearlessness wrapped in wit.

I pulled back my shirt, fingers brushing the crescent mark. No spark, no clarity—just

the echo of her face, the confusion we shared. It should've been nothing. It wasn't.

I stared at the hearth, trying to force the fire to burn away the questions.

Nothing I had been told or expected explained this.

A birthmark was just that—nothing more. And yet.

.. It made no sense, but neither did the feeling in my gut.

This need to know more, to protect her from everything—including myself.

The room closed in around me, heavy with the choice that wasn't really a choice.

I had always been taught one thing: protect the pack above all else.

Never let anything interfere. I held my breath and let it out slowly.

So why the hell did I feel this way? Why couldn't I just ignore it, ignore her?

My protective instincts surged, cutting through any plan or strategy I thought I had.

I shifted in the chair, staring out at the night, wondering if this was how it felt to go crazy.

To want to rip down everything that mattered and build it back up differently, with someone like her at the center.

I was used to wanting, but not wanting like this.

Not something I couldn't control. The mark on my shoulder burned with the same

intensity as the memory of her eyes.

For the first time, I couldn't convince myself that the pack was all that mattered.

That maybe, just maybe, something else was just as important.

I should have hated the thought. Fought it.

But I couldn't. It was wrapped too tightly around me, like her scent and her amber eyes.

I closed my eyes and saw the light from our marks, saw it as vividly as if she were standing right in front of me.

This wasn't going away. She wasn't going away.

I should have been filled with anger at the idea that I was so easily distracted. Instead, something else rose to the surface. A raw, untamed desire to keep her safe. It wasn't like me. It wasn't what I had been taught. It was something primal, something I didn't want to admit but couldn't deny.

The fire dimmed in the hearth, but the heat in the room stayed strong.

Stayed as fierce as the impulse running through me.

It was more than just duty. It was more than I could understand, but I would get to the bottom of it.

The old iron lock on my door was more than a barrier tonight; it was a promise.

A promise to find out why she had this hold on me and why, despite everything, I

wanted it.

I wanted it like I wanted air to breathe.

The more I tried to ignore it, the more it took root.

I couldn't shake it. I couldn't shake her.

The outside world shrank to nothing but this one room and my resolve to protect Serena Sterling.

It didn't matter that I didn't know what that meant or what it would cost me.

She was mine to shield, and the idea of anything else was like ash in my mouth.

The howls in the distance faded, but the sound of my own heartbeat took their place.

Steady. Determined. It echoed in my veins, and every thud whispered the same thing: She's mine.

Memories moved in, fast and unwelcome, as I stared into the fire.

My father's voice came back to me in fragments, like it traveled across time and distance to remind me of what I should have never forgotten.

I was a kid, barely old enough to shift, running with him through the forest. We were side by side, his strides measured so I could keep up.

"Strength isn't just muscle," he told me, and the words echoed off the trees and through the years.

The next time he said them, I was older, covered in dirt and his blood, looking down at his body as the breath left him.

The image of it pressed against me. It pressed and held and would never let go.

The flames shifted in the hearth, and I was back in the forest. I remembered my father lifting me onto his shoulders so I could see the way the trees seemed to go on forever.

“One day, all of this will be yours to protect,” he said.

His voice was steady, sure. He made it sound like a gift and a burden.

Like both those things were one and the same.

It was the day of my first hunt. We moved as wolves, he as a massive black beast, and me, a pup, racing to keep up.

I felt invincible with him at my side. I remember the wind rushing through my fur, the excitement of the chase.

How he taught me to feel every muscle in my body, to trust the instincts passed down through generations.

That day was filled with pride, mine for him and his for me.

But mostly, I remembered the promise he made me repeat until I could say it as easily as my own name: The pack is everything.

That lesson never wavered. It was like an old scar, healed but visible.

It sat next to another memory, older but just as strong.

One I couldn't shake, no matter how much I tried.

Our territory was under attack, and the rival wolves outnumbered us.

I watched from the trees as my father fought with a ferocity I'd never seen before.

I remembered the way he threw himself into the battle, fearless and fierce.

His growls were like thunder, shaking the ground and the certainty of our enemies.

He returned victorious, but not untouched.

Blood matted his fur, some his and some not, as he stumbled back into the heart of the camp.

The others surrounded him, a mixture of relief and respect in their eyes.

He took a breath, shifted back to human, and collapsed.

I rushed to his side, confusion and fear making my limbs feel heavy and slow.

He was weak, and I was unprepared to see him that way.

To know that he was mortal, that our strength had limits.

He gripped my arm, his hold firm despite the blood that flowed from him, and said, "Strength isn't just muscle." I didn't understand what he meant then, but I do now.

I understood it when I looked down at him, older, the life slipping out of him and his eyes locked on mine.

That understanding settled deep in me, where it would grow like roots.

Where it would pull me back from distractions, from anything that threatened to make me forget.

The fire crackled again, and I was with him in the sacred caves.

The memory was strong, the stone walls feeling close and powerful.

I watched him trace his hand along the smooth surface of the cave, his eyes reflecting the luminescent glow of the stones.

“These are your legacy,” he told me. “Never forget the mountain's power is our birthright. It must be defended at any cost.”

I took those words into me. Held them closer than anything else, like they could shield me from every doubt. It was a time before curses and birthmarks. Before fate showed up, wrecking everything. When all that mattered was the pack, and everything made sense.

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*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:07 am*

“Protect the pack above all else.” The fire burned down to embers, and the memory of his last words to me stayed hot in my mind.

I was a child and a man, both at the same time, standing over him as his final breath left his body.

It was gone, and so was he. But his words remained, echoing through my life and my choices.

I saw myself the night of my first full moon as Alpha.

It came the same way it had for my father—after a fight and a death.

I could feel it like it was happening again, the weight of the title settling onto me, more solid than any bruise or wound.

I was filled with a combination of pride and terror.

The pack ran with me that night, and I remember the strength in our numbers, the collective sound of our howls claiming the territory as mine.

As ours. I led them under the stars, feeling the mountain’s energy course through us, feeling his presence in the night and in me.

I wanted to live up to it, to be everything he believed I could be.

The pack is everything. Protect it above all else.

I returned to the present, these memories like a storm I couldn't weather.

Like rain on a roof, pounding and relentless, but unable to drown out my need to protect Serena.

Everything my father taught me said I should put the pack first. Said I should fight whatever was pulling me towards her.

Said I should ignore this feeling that was as persistent and consuming as the memories themselves.

I didn't know how to tell him he might have been wrong. I didn't know how to tell myself.

But the marks on our bodies made promises I couldn't ignore.

The more I thought about her, the less the past felt like the only thing that mattered.

The less the weight of my history seemed like a burden, and more like a chain I could finally break.

But could I break it? Could I go against my father's last words, the ones that had defined me, guided me, kept me steady and in line?

I needed answers, but everything I knew said I wouldn't find them at the bottom of a mystery.

I'd find them in the same place my father had: in a promise kept, in a pack protected.

In strength that wasn't just muscle. I let out a breath, slow and unsure, letting it hang in the air as I looked past the fire and into the past that refused to let me go.

I left the fire to die in the hearth. Let it sputter out the way my father never did.

The room was cold now, and I was too restless to sit.

Too haunted by what my old man would have thought about Serena and me.

What he would have thought about her. About me.

A fresh ache throbbed through my shoulder, the mark burning under my skin.

I tried to ignore it. Tried to think past it as I moved to my desk.

Papers littered the top, but they weren't just reports and patrol schedules.

They were lives. The pack's. Mine. Ewan's.

The clutter was an eyesore, the kind of thing I usually couldn't stand. But it had a way of quieting the noise in my head. It was proof that things were manageable, that a little order could cut through the chaos. Not tonight. Not with this uncertainty snapping at my heels, refusing to let go.

I pushed some of the papers aside, not sure what I was looking for, only that I needed to find it.

Details were my weapon against the storm inside me.

They kept me in control, kept the past from drowning me.

But what was scattered in front of me wasn't just about patrols or border disputes.

It was about something a hell of a lot more personal.

It was about me. About Serena. About the one wolf I thought I could count on.

Conversations with Ewan played back in my mind.

Rehearsed, but not. Sincere, but not. They rang hollow now, like echoes from the far side of a canyon.

He'd been by my side longer than anyone.

His voice had always been a lifeline. But now it felt like a lure, drawing me in while he plotted behind my back.

I sat at the desk, shoving a pile of patrol schedules aside. My fingers itched for answers, but all I found were the same route rotations I'd approved last month.

I flipped through a border watch log. Southside activity—normal. A missing rabbit trap. I threw the page down. Too ordinary.

Next, the patrol training schedule. Ewan's handwriting was neat. Too neat. I wanted it to scream guilt, but all it gave me was routine.

I found a requisition form marked urgent—signed by Bram. I frowned. No link to Ewan, but it raised a different question: Why the hell were they stocking silver-tipped arrows? I made a mental note to follow up, but it wasn't what I was looking for.

I dug deeper, frustration mounting like heat behind my ribs. Ewan's shift reports finally surfaced—line after line of clean, consistent, boring detail. Nothing out of place. Nothing that would explain the bile rising in my throat.

And then I saw it. A folded scrap of paper, half-hidden beneath the bottom drawer. The handwriting on it was different—rushed, angry.

I opened it with trembling hands. One line.

“Midnight. East Ridge border. Alone.”

And a signature I knew too well. E.

My pulse spiked. That location was too close to Silver Ridge territory. Too familiar.

I read it again. Once. Twice. Each time, the truth sank deeper.

Ewan. The wolf I would've died for was the one leading me to ruin.

He didn't just distrust Serena. He hated her. He made no secret of it, and maybe that should have been a clue. His reaction to her capture was all fury, all venom. It came from a place I thought was loyalty. It came from somewhere else.

The room spun around me, and I had to steady myself against the desk. The idea of Ewan's betrayal hit hard, as hard as anything I'd ever felt. Maybe harder. I wanted to tear something apart. I wanted to find Ewan and confront him. I wanted to put an end to this before it destroyed us all.

My father's voice echoed in my mind, telling me to stay strong, stay focused.

But how could I, when the one I trusted most had turned?

When everything I thought I knew was unraveling faster than I could keep up?

I thought Morrigan's riddle meant the wolf to ruin our pack and my mate were the same person, but maybe I was wrong again.

Anger burned in me, but so did disbelief. That Ewan would do this. That he'd risk our

entire legacy. That he'd risk me. But wasn't that what I was doing too? Risking it all for Serena? Did I even know if she was as clueless as she seemed? Was this part of her plan, to pit us against each other?

I remembered the night Ewan stood between me and a blade meant for my throat.

We were barely more than pups. He bled for me.

Now he'd bleed me dry. The room felt smaller than it had when I first shut the door.

Smaller and filled with doubt. It was choking me, squeezing the air from my lungs, from the entire mountain.

I didn't know if I could trust anyone, especially myself.

But I had to know. I had to know the truth, even if it meant facing down the one wolf who had always been at my side.

I resolved to confront Ewan, but the hesitation was there.

I could feel it crawling under my skin, colder than the mountain air that seeped in through the window.

If he had betrayed me, betrayed the pack, then what?

What did that mean for everything I thought I knew? What did it mean for me and Serena?

I wanted to scream the question to the ceiling, to the rocks and the wind and the spirits of the wolves that came before me. But I couldn't. All I could do was whisper it to the empty room, my voice breaking like the faith I used to have: "Am I strong

enough to do what needs to be done?”

I stood there, feeling more exposed than I ever had. More alone. The idea of my best friend turning on me was a weight I couldn't lift, a wound that bled out onto everything. Onto the pack, onto Serena, onto the memory of my father and what he would have wanted me to do.

Moonlight spilled through the crystal window, stretching its pale fingers across the room until it reached me.

It lit my expression, my clenched fists, the question that refused to let me go.

It wouldn't leave, no matter how much I wanted to drive it out.

The pack is everything—but if the pack is rotting from the inside, who do I protect?

The legacy... or the truth? The mark on my shoulder flared up again, sharp and insistent.

Like it knew the decision was already made, and it didn't care if I bled for it.

I wouldn't run from it. I couldn't. Not this time.

Not when the stakes were this high, and I had more to lose than ever before.

The mountain whispered through the walls, ancient and alive. And for the first time, I wondered if it was warning me—or her.

### Chapter seven

Serena

We moved together, Tristan and I, navigating the rocky mountain trail with a fragile sense of purpose.

Tense but civil, I could almost convince myself it wasn't an awkward first date.

After dinner last night he insisted we needed answers about our birthmarks and that this trek into the wilderness might give us a clue.

I should've said no. Should've refused to follow him into the woods, especially after the dream.

But something in the way he said we needed answers...

it hooked into the part of me still desperate to believe in fate.

Besides, what's a couple of hours in the woods with the alpha of your rival pack? Romantic. Or a death wish.

"This trail better lead somewhere helpful," I muttered, glancing sideways at Tristan's unreadable face. He looked too calm. Too in control. Was this some elaborate trap? Was I walking straight into my father's hands?

"Keep up, Sterling," Tristan called back, as if my name was an insult. The cocky

smirk on his face made me want to race ahead, just to prove I could.

“I’m giving you a head start,” I shot back. He didn’t need to know I was saving my strength for the downhill run. Or retreat.

He slowed enough for me to catch up, and we walked in step for a few moments, the path winding higher into the heart of the mountain. An eagle screamed overhead, probably annoyed we were intruding. Tristan glanced at me, a question in his eyes.

“Do you really think this will help us figure out what’s going on?” I asked, more to fill the silence than because I needed reassurance.

“The old ways hold answers. It’s up to us to find them,” he said, vague and serious.

Our hands brushed again, for the eighth time since we started. His touch sparked through me like an electric current, and I saw him glance at the mark on my wrist before pulling away. My heart kicked up, traitorous as always around him.

Tristan quickened his pace, either eager to get there or to avoid more awkward contact.

We came out onto a narrow ledge that overlooked the valley below, our territory stretching into the distance.

It was the first time I’d seen it from this perspective, and a twinge of longing hit me, unexpected and unwelcome.

“Getting homesick?” Tristan asked. His tone was light, but I didn’t miss the undercurrent.

“Like you’d give me time to pack,” I shot back.

I twisted a lock of hair around my finger, hiding behind the familiar gesture.

In truth, his territory was impressive—more than that, really.

Beautiful in a wild, rugged way that got under my skin.

And with my father keeping secrets from me, I was on my own to finally find the answers to this curse.

That was the one thing I never understood.

We both wanted the same outcome – to end this gods-forsaken plague over my life – yet he treated me like a prisoner with no freedom to fight for myself.

Tristan turned away, leading us past a crumbling stone wall.

It was so ancient it looked more like a pile of rocks.

Old words and faded symbols decorated the stones, their meanings lost to time.

I caught up with him as the path sloped down, feeling the change in the air.

Like we were stepping into another world.

Ahead, a circle of stones emerged from the mist, serene and eerie. They jutted from the ground like the mountain's teeth, their surfaces carved with runes that twisted my brain in strange directions when I tried to decipher them. The whole place buzzed with something ancient and alive.

“Think we’re supposed to join hands and chant?” I said, masking my unease with sarcasm.

Tristan ignored me, moving to the center of the circle.

He stood there for a long time, silent and contemplative, like he was tuning in to a frequency only he could hear.

I wanted to tell him to stop brooding, but something in the set of his shoulders made me hold back.

Instead, I picked my way through the stones, pretending to study them but mostly watching him.

There was a grace to his intensity that I couldn't look away from.

The air inside the circle was colder, and I swore the light bent wrong around the stones. My mark flared, not hot, but icy—like something ancient had just noticed me. I took a step back, pulse thundering. One of the runes—it looked like the broken moon from my dream.

The runes twisted the longer I stared, like they weren't meant to be read so much as remembered. My mark pulsed once, sharp as a warning. Or a welcome.

We stayed there for what felt like hours, my own disappointment creeping in despite myself. Nothing happened, no magical revelations or sudden insights. Just the wind whistling through the rocks, making me feel small and foolish.

I crossed my arms, about to say something snarky to break the silence, when Tristan moved to my side. I tensed, expecting another lecture about patience and fate. Instead, he touched my arm, accidental and lingering.

“Serena,” he started, then stopped.

My name on his lips threw me, and I let out a breath I didn't know I was holding. I didn't realize until that moment how much I'd been craving to hear it from him.

"We should stay a while longer," he finally said, retreating back to safer ground.

I gave him a skeptical look but nodded.

We waited, the minutes stretching thin between us, the air full of things we couldn't quite say. Eventually, we turned to leave, back up the trail that seemed to have grown steeper since we'd come down.

The attack came out of nowhere.

Fangs flashed before our eyes like lethal confetti. Tristan moved fast, shoving me behind a boulder as the forest erupted with snarls and the snapping of jaws.

"Down!" he yelled, but I was already there, instincts taking over.

I glanced at him, getting ready to shift just as a wolf—one of my own pack, out for blood after our failure to heed my father's warning—struck.

The beast lunged, its teeth sinking into Tristan's shoulder; his face drained of color in an instant before twisting in shock and pain.

My breath stuttered as I saw the savage bite, the wound deep and bleeding.

The wolf that lunged for Tristan had a scar above its right eye. My breath caught. Kellan. My sparring partner since we were pups. And now, teeth bared, he wanted Tristan dead—and me with him.

"Tristan!" I yelled, my voice nearly lost amid the chaos of growls and crashing

undergrowth. He grabbed my arm, pulling me close. “You have to move, now,” he said, teeth clenched.

Blood spread across his shirt, soaking through the fabric like a dark, spreading curse. My heart slammed in my chest, a frantic drumbeat that left no room for thinking, only acting.

“Not without you,” I said, half panicked, half furious. I put my hand over his, feeling the sticky warmth there. “We have to get you out of here.”

His jaw set in that stubborn way I was starting to recognize all too well, but he gave a short nod.

“We need cover,” he managed, each word edged with pain.

We bolted from the open glade, the sound of snapping twigs and distant howls chasing us.

A furious snarl rang out as another wolf’s attack shattered the stillness of the forest. I refused to look back, focusing solely on Tristan—on keeping him upright, even as the betrayal of my pack turned our world to a nightmare.

The forest closed around us, a dark and twisting maze.

It felt alive, hostile, every shadow a potential enemy.

Tristan stumbled, catching himself with a growl that was more than just pain.

He was losing blood, too much of it. I slipped my arm around his waist, feeling the strength there waver.

He was losing too much blood to shift into his wolf form, and I feared I wasn't strong enough to carry him on my own, even if I transformed.

"They're gaining," he said, his breath ragged.

"They'll have to catch us first," I shot back, more defiant than I felt.

We pushed deeper into the woods, the sound of pursuit slowly fading. I could feel his steps getting heavier, each one a struggle. My mind raced, frantic for a plan, a miracle, anything.

Then I saw it.

A wall of vines covered the rock face to our right, thick and overgrown, but not enough to hide the cave entrance behind it. I tugged Tristan toward it, the opening barely big enough for us to squeeze through.

"Here," I said, urgency propelling me forward.

The space was narrow at first, forcing us into a dark and winding corridor.

It opened into a small chamber, the walls smooth and cold against my back.

I let Tristan down gently, then tore at his shirt, exposing the wound.

Blood was everywhere, slick and red, and I fought the rising tide of panic that threatened to drown me.

"Tristan," I said, voice breaking. I didn't know what else to say, how else to keep him from slipping away. "Don't you dare die on me."

He smiled, a faint and stubborn thing, as if to say that he didn't plan to.

The cave was ancient, the walls breathing with the damp chill of forgotten things.

Blood soaked through Tristan's shirt, a dark stain that spread too fast for my peace of mind.

The fang marks slashed across his body like some grotesque artwork, and I steeled myself to patch them up.

"You whimper, you die," I warned, hoping my bravado concealed my panic.

Tristan's grin was a ghost of its former self, but at least he hadn't stopped smiling.

He was in no condition to argue or resist, so I took that as a hint and reached for the wound. My hands shook, but I gritted my teeth and applied pressure. Hard.

Tristan jerked, a low groan escaping his lips. His eyes fluttered closed, and for a second I thought I'd lost him. The ruby liquid oozed in a sickening rush, and I clamped my hands down to stem the blood.

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*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:07 am*

“Stay with me, Voss,” I muttered, more desperate than I wanted to admit. I couldn’t look at his face. Not while I was this scared.

His hand found mine, weak but insistent. “You got it, Sterling.”

The words settled something inside me. He wasn’t dead.

Yet. I worked faster, tearing off my shirt and shredding it to make bandages.

Not exactly first aid 101, but it would have to do until the wolf magic in his veins could speed up the healing.

The bleeding slowed, then finally stopped.

Tristan lay back, breathing labored yet steady.

But I didn’t miss his eyes roaming my chest and the black and blush lace bra I’d left myself in.

“You’re a stubborn bastard, you know that?” I said, relief creeping in where panic had been.

He chuckled, a sound that sent warmth spiraling through me. “Takes one to know one.”

The cave wrapped around us, intimate and ancient, with barely visible carvings etched into the stone. Symbols that reminded me of the stone circle, faded and

mysterious. The scent of earth and minerals hung in the damp air, and I wondered what this place had seen, what secrets it held.

“Quite the love nest you found,” Tristan said, his voice teasing but worn.

“Who said it’s for you?” I shot back, though the effect was ruined by my shaking hands. I wrapped the remains of my shirt around his shoulder, tying it tight. “You know this means we’re stuck here, right? Those guys are still out there.”

I met his eyes, intense and blue, watching me with a focus that made my skin flush. He nodded, the seriousness returning.

“It’s safe for now,” he said. “They won’t expect us to double back.”

His confidence should have annoyed me, but instead it calmed the storm in my chest. We’d escaped. We were alive. For how long, I didn’t know, but I’d take what I could get.

“You’re sure you don’t want me to yell for help?” I asked, settling down next to him.

“And risk a pack war?” Tristan shook his head, wincing a little. “Not unless you want to give my beta another reason to hate you.”

The mention of Ewan made me flinch. I was almost starting to miss him and his sunny personality.

Tristan must have noticed, because his gaze softened. “He’s loyal to a fault,” he said. “But you’ve probably figured that out already.”

“He’s a pain in the ass is what he is,” I replied, but there was no real bite in my words. I looked away, not wanting to let the conversation veer too close to things that

scared me more than arrows. “And he’s right. Your pack would do better without me messing it up.”

The silence that followed was different this time, not awkward or tense but heavy with things unspoken. The chill crept back in, and Tristan shifted, sitting up despite my protest.

“I grew up on that mountain,” he said. His tone was flat, but the kind that had sharp edges if you listened close. “Forced to watch my father treat his pack like pawns on a chessboard. As if family was everything, but somehow nothing at all. I swore I’d never be that kind of alpha.”

I watched him, unsure what to say. His jaw was set, and I could see how hard it was for him to admit even that much.

“I know exactly what you mean,” I said softly. “But you’re not him.”

“Sometimes I wonder,” Tristan replied, voice low, almost to himself. Then his eyes met mine, searching. “What about you? What’s it like to be the outcast of Silver Ridge?”

That made me laugh, bitter and short. “If only it were that glamorous. Try the cursed beauty, destined to die alone.”

I shouldn’t have said it. Once the words were out, I wanted to take them back. But Tristan didn’t flinch. He just listened, the way no one else ever had.

“You’re not alone now,” he said, simple and true.

That did something to me, unraveled something I’d been holding together for too long.

We sat like that, surrounded by stone and shadows, both of us nursing old wounds and new. The air chilled further as night crept in, and I fought the urge to shiver.

“We should start a fire,” Tristan suggested, his arm moving to reach for something to burn. I pushed him back down with a look.

“Not if it means you bleeding out again.” I took my own advice and leaned against him, feeling his body tense then relax at the contact. “This will have to do.”

The warmth of him, of us, seeped through me. Our breath mingled in the cool air, and for the first time, it felt okay to just be. Together, in this strange in-between space that was neither pack nor war.

“You’re freezing,” Tristan said, moving his good arm to pull me closer.

“So are you,” I replied, settling against his chest.

The nearness was dizzying. Intoxicating. Our hands brushed again, no accident this time. The touch was tentative, almost shy. I felt his fingers against my cheek, then ghosting down to my lips. My own hand found its way to his chest, resting there where I could feel the steady thump of his heart.

His fingers brushed my lips, and I wanted to run. Not from him—but from what I already knew: once I kissed him, there was no going back. No pretending this didn’t mean everything.

I shouldn’t have wanted this. I shouldn’t have wanted him. But when his hand brushed my cheek, the fear unraveled faster than I could stop it. I leaned in, not because I was sure—but because for once, I wanted something just for me.

We didn’t say anything, but we didn’t have to. The silence was loud enough.

Then, slowly, Tristan tipped my chin up, and the world tilted with it. His eyes held mine, speaking volumes that left me breathless. He leaned in, pausing just long enough for me to meet him halfway. Our lips touched, soft and electric. Then all at once, the floodgates opened.

The kiss was deep and demanding, like years of questions finally being answered.

His hands tangled in my hair, pulling me closer.

I pressed against him, careful to avoid his injury but not wanting any space between us.

I tasted the fire and the fear, the danger and the promise.

Everything I hadn't let myself want until now.

When we finally broke apart, breathless and surprised, a faint light danced in the darkness. Our birthmarks glowed when we touched, casting an iridescent light that shimmered like it had a life of its own. We stared, first at our marks, then at each other.

The glow pulsed in time with our heartbeats, casting pale light across the cave walls. For a moment, it felt like the mountain was breathing with us. Like it had been waiting for this.

Something clicked in my chest. A memory—no, a warning. A voice echoing from the dream I barely remembered: One must choose. One must lose. My hand trembled. I didn't know what I'd just chosen. But I felt it. I'd already made it.

"It's true," Tristan said, voice tinged with wonder and something else. "It's really true."

And it was. As soon as Tristan's lips touched mine, it was like an instant knowing in my soul. That this alpha from a rival pack, a wolf who was marked just like me, was destined to be my mate. Fated. I nodded, still reeling from the kiss, from everything.

"I guess we are cursed after all," I said, though the words had lost their sting.

We didn't know what it meant, not really. But for once, it felt like maybe there was a chance. I should've been terrified. I still was, a little. What would this mean when my father found out? When my pack learned I'd kissed the enemy? But none of that mattered here. Not yet.

I pulled his arm tighter around me, feeling Tristan relax as he leaned back. I followed, wrapping myself into his warmth. He held me there, close and unguarded, until the glow of our marks faded into the night.

I should have been uneasy. Torn, conflicted, unsure. And I was. But more than that, I felt something new. Hopeful.

Morning dripped into the cave, cold and slow. Voices floated from outside, and I was instantly awake. Urgent, low voices that shouldn't have been there. I held my breath, heart pounding, feeling Tristan's arm heavy across my waist. I had to get free. I had to know who was out there.

His grip was protective even in sleep, a warmth I could have sunk into if everything wasn't suddenly so wrong. I wriggled away, each inch a struggle against the tangle of my own feelings. As soon as I was clear, I crouched low, listening hard.

The voices were muted by the walls but close, too close for comfort. I couldn't catch the words, only the tone—tense, conspiratorial, nothing I wanted to hear with Tristan so vulnerable beside me. My skin prickled, and I inched toward the entrance, staying low and quiet.

The cave was dim, its shadows longer and colder than the night before. I crept forward, the ancient carvings like ghostly reminders that we were never really alone here. The voices grew clearer, one of them unmistakable.

“Ewan.” The name hit me like a fist to the chest. I didn’t need to see him to know that voice. But what the hell was he doing out here? And why didn’t I feel relief—just fear?

Through the veil of vines, I saw them.

Ewan stood with a hooded figure, the morning light casting them in silhouettes that seemed larger than life.

That voice. Smooth, sharp-edged, and familiar in a way that made my stomach twist. I didn’t have a name, but my bones remembered it—and they wanted to run.

They were close, talking with a kind of urgency that only came with secrets.

My pulse quickened. I stayed hidden, barely breathing, willing myself to catch what they were saying.

Ewan gestured sharply, his movements angry and frustrated.

I strained to hear, edging forward, knowing how stupid it was to put myself at risk of being seen.

But I couldn’t stop. Not now. Not with them so close, not with everything suddenly on the line.

I tuned into my wolf senses and sharpened my hearing to make out the words they spoke.

“...alpha is getting too attached to the girl,” Ewan said, his words clear and cutting.

I froze, heart skipping. They were talking about Tristan. About me. But who was this other guy?

The hooded figure didn't flinch, his stance as calm and sure as Ewan's was agitated. His voice was low, chillingly familiar in a way that tightened every nerve in my body.

“Everything is proceeding as planned. The stones will soon be ours.”

The words sent a jolt through me. Whoever he was, he thought he had this under control.

Was he talking about the same stones my pack tried to steal?

The ones they captured me over? As they spoke, my wrist tingled.

Not a burn, but a cold pulse under my skin, like the mark itself was listening.

Like the mountain didn't want me to miss what was happening.

I leaned in too far, too eager. A loose rock shifted beneath my hand, clattering down the cave wall. The sound echoed like a gunshot, and I stilled, breath locked in my chest.

Their conversation cut off abruptly. Both men turned toward the noise, scanning the area. I ducked back into the shadows, panic spiking. Had they seen me? Was it too late to warn Tristan? I inched away from the entrance, every instinct screaming to run, to hide, to do anything but freeze like this.

The silence stretched thin and brittle. Then I heard it again, their voices retreating, quieter, more cautious.

“Someone’s onto us,” Ewan said, the words carrying back to me on the cold air.

“Doesn’t matter,” the other man replied, a certainty in his tone that made my skin crawl. “We’ll take care of it.”

I waited until they were gone, until even the whisper of their presence faded from the woods.

My heart wouldn’t slow, pounding out a rhythm of fear and confusion.

Ewan’s betrayal was almost too much to wrap my head around, and the other voice—it tugged at something deep, something I didn’t want to look at too closely. Not yet.

I forced myself back to Tristan, where I found him still asleep, unaware of the storm raging just beyond the cave. Just beyond me. I settled beside him, every part of me tangled in knots that had nothing to do with the curse.

He shifted, pulling me close again. His touch was unconscious, but it grounded me, reminding me of the hope I’d felt the night before. The hope that maybe, just maybe, there was a way through all of this.

I should’ve shaken him awake. Should’ve told him that everything we’d just started to believe in might already be unraveling. But the weight of his arm, the peace on his face—it silenced me. What if waking him meant ending this?

But now everything was upside down, a mess of doubt and danger that left me raw. Was Ewan just playing Tristan all along? And the other man—did my father know he

was here, making deals with the enemy? Was that his plan all along? Was that why he'd let them take me so easily?

The questions ate at me, a relentless churn of suspicion and betrayal.

I wanted to wake Tristan, to tell him everything.

To scream that I didn't care, that I'd choose this—us—over anything.

But something held me back, a shadow of hesitation that felt too much like the past. Maybe this was all another trap I'd find myself in with no way out.

I lay there, stuck between hope and despair, caught in a web I couldn't yet unravel. The cave grew colder, the light creeping in around us, turning night's magic into morning's doubt. And still, despite it all, I found myself wanting.

Wanting the truth. Wanting to belong. Wanting him.

The cave grew colder as morning pressed in, turning night's magic into doubt. I didn't know what would come next, only that the words haunted me still: "The stones will soon be ours." And for the first time, I didn't know whose side I was truly on.

### Chapter eight

#### Tristan

The dusky silhouette of the Stormvale compound loomed ahead, shrouded in twilight and secrets.

Shadows crept along the forest floor as we made our way back, each step a reminder of the ambush that had left us raw and weary.

Serena walked beside me, still in her bra and jeans, her silence more unnerving than any threat.

I could feel the watchful eyes of the pack as we approached, especially those stealing glances at Serena's body.

I resisted the urge to wrap my arm around her.

Not because she needed the protection—Serena didn't need anyone's shield—but because every stare felt like an insult I couldn't afford to answer with teeth.

But it was Ewan's presence at the gate—his stance tense and wary—that sent a jolt through me.

His eyes locked onto us, searching and accusing, igniting an uneasy flicker of doubt in my mind.

“Where the hell have you been?” Ewan's voice cut through the air as we reached the gates.

His arms were crossed, and he tapped one foot impatiently, eyes darting between us.

“Nice to see you too,” I said, trying to sound calm. But the words came out sharper than I intended, edged with the strain of the last twelve hours.

Serena remained quiet, her expression unreadable. She twirled a lock of her hair around her finger, a gesture I'd come to recognize as a shield. A mask for whatever she didn't want us to see.

“We've been expecting you back for hours,” Ewan continued. “Thought you'd been taken or killed, or—” His gaze pierced mine, demanding an explanation.

The compound loomed behind him, its rough-hewn timbers casting long shadows in the fading light. The pack watched from shadows and windows, their gazes sharp as blades. I didn't know if they were looking to me for leadership or waiting for me to fall.

“We ran into trouble,” I said finally, glancing at Serena.

Ewan's posture shifted, a flicker of something like satisfaction crossing his face before he masked it with feigned concern. His eyes flicked to the dried blood on my shoulder. Too quick. Too knowing. He hadn't asked about the injury—hadn't needed to. “What kind of trouble?”

“Ambush in the woods,” Serena said, her voice steady and cold. She studied Ewan with a focus that matched his, refusing to look away.

“Silver Ridge?” Ewan asked, but I caught an edge of eagerness in his tone.

I nodded, the memory of the attack still vivid—wolves circling, snarls in the dark. Alaric's unmistakable scent. “Had to take the long way back to lose them.”

Ewan frowned, but there was something wrong in his expression. His surprise felt forced, rehearsed. I didn't like the way he looked at Serena, as if she were a puzzle he needed to solve.

“And you're both... fine?” He said it like a challenge, daring us to admit we weren't.

“Yeah,” I replied. “Tired, but fine.”

He stepped closer, eyes narrowing. “You sure you're not leaving anything out?”

Serena smiled, but there was no warmth in it. “Don't worry, Ewan. We wouldn't want to distract you from whatever important business you were tending to while we were getting chased.”

Her sarcasm hung in the air, and I almost laughed. Ewan didn't.

“I'm just making sure you didn't lead them back here,” he said, casting a nervous glance around the compound. The restlessness in him was unmistakable, like he couldn't wait to be done with us and move on to something else. “Tristan, we need to talk.”

Serena raised an eyebrow at me, the challenge clear in her eyes. I hesitated, the words sticking in my throat. Everything in me screamed not to trust what I was seeing, but I pushed it down. Old habits.

“You've said enough,” I told him. My voice was low, final. “I'll call you when I need your opinion.”

Ewan gave me a hard look, the lines around his mouth tightening. “Fine,” he said finally. “But don't wait too long. You might not like what you hear.”

I watched him turn and walk away, his movements stiff and hurried.

I tried to tell myself that my suspicions were just the product of too little sleep and too many surprises.

That the unease gnawing at me would pass if I let it.

But I couldn't shake the image of Ewan's face, the way he'd almost smiled at Serena's mention of the attack.

“We can't stay out here,” Serena said, her voice pulling me back. “They're all watching.”

I glanced around at the compound, at the pack who depended on me to make the right decisions. I needed to get a grip. For them, if not for myself.

“Let's go inside,” I said, trying to sound more certain than I felt. Serena's eyes lingered on me a moment longer, filled with questions I wasn't ready to answer. Then she nodded, and together we walked past the gates, leaving Ewan's shadow behind.

The old library whispered with ancient secrets as I slipped inside, the heavy wooden door groaning in protest. Candlelight danced along the stone walls, breathing life into the forgotten symbols etched by wolves long dead.

Serena stood by the window, silhouetted against the night sky, an alluring mystery I couldn't unravel.

The room hummed with something deeper than silence—a tension that echoed the

beat of my own heart.

She turned as I approached, and the way her eyes met mine stirred the storm inside me.

I closed the distance between us, drawn by a force I didn't fully understand. "Couldn't sleep either?" I asked, my voice softer than I'd intended.

"Not when there's so much to unravel," she said, gesturing to the scattered papers and books. Her eyes were watchful, as if gauging how much she could trust me.

The weight of yesterday's ambush still clung to us, a shadow in every word we shared. I took a seat beside her, letting our shoulders touch—a simple gesture, but it sent a rush through me that I couldn't ignore.

"We're getting closer to the truth," I said, trying to focus on the task at hand, not the way her nearness scrambled my thoughts. "But the more we find, the more dangerous it gets."

"That's never stopped me before," Serena replied with a hint of defiance, her lips curving in a way that made it hard to look away.

We bent over the table, the flickering candlelight casting a circle of warmth around us. It felt like the rest of the world had faded, leaving only the two of us and the questions that lay between.

"The celestial stones," I began, choosing my words carefully. "They're not just powerful. They're the heart of what binds my pack to this place."

Serena's gaze was steady, drawing the truth out of me like a lure. "So what happens if we break the curse?"

I hesitated, the answer clawing at me. “I don’t know yet, but I have a feeling it would have major consequences for my pack. This mountain.”

Her silence was more profound than any response, filling the room with the gravity of what I'd said. I watched her, waiting for a sign of what she thought. What she felt.

“Then why help me?” she asked, her voice a careful blend of challenge and vulnerability.

Because I'm already in too deep, I thought, but the words stayed lodged inside. I ran a hand through my hair, frustration gnawing at me. “I need to show you something,” I said instead, rising to retrieve the manuscript.

The stone walls seemed to watch us, a presence that felt both protective and ominous. I found the loose rock in the far corner, the manuscript tucked away like a forbidden secret.

“It's old,” I said, handing it to her, our fingers brushing for an electric moment. “Very old.”

We settled back into the candle's glow, the world narrowing to the fragile pages before us. The words were dense and tangled, but Serena's focus was unwavering. She was a puzzle of contradictions—sharp and soft, daring and guarded. I was losing myself to the pull of her, the mystery that she was.

Her scent wound around me—wild honey and moonlight—leaving me breathless.

“What is it?” she asked, sensing my distraction.

“Nothing,” I lied, my voice betraying me. “Everything.”

Our eyes met, and I saw the flicker of understanding in hers. It was terrifying and thrilling, this thing growing between us.

As we read on, the room closed in, the air thick with the revelation: The stones could break her curse, but at a price. The cost was too great, too unthinkable. I struggled to breathe, the weight of it pressing down.

“The pack—” I started, my words tangled with emotion. “Serena, I can’t—”

The sudden noise outside shattered the moment. Footsteps. Voices. I leapt to my feet, heart pounding.

“Someone’s there,” Serena said, urgency in her eyes. We moved quickly, hiding the manuscript back in its place.

The hallway was empty when we opened the door, but I couldn’t shake the feeling of being watched, of someone knowing what we were trying to uncover. Is someone already on to us? Is it too late to hide what we’ve found?

The risk was growing, and with it, the choices I wasn’t sure I was ready to make.

I left the library with the chill of unanswered questions clinging to my skin.

The shadows in the compound seemed darker, every corner concealing a potential threat.

Serena’s worried expression haunted me, her eyes reflecting the doubts I’d tried to push aside.

But the unease gnawed too deeply, and my wolf demanded answers.

I slipped through the halls, silent as the tension that wound itself around my heart.

Each step toward Ewan's quarters was a betrayal in itself, a path I couldn't turn back from.

The night was quiet, the kind of quiet that spoke of watchful eyes and unspoken intentions. My instincts pulled me forward, warning me that time was short, that the danger was too close to ignore.

Serena's parting words echoed in my mind, a mixture of concern and challenge. I couldn't tell her what I suspected—not until I knew for sure. But leaving her alone in the compound made my gut twist with doubt.

Ewan's quarters were tucked in the far wing, away from the others. His absence was like an accusation, as if he'd known I'd come looking. The door creaked as I pushed it open, a sound that seemed to amplify the treachery I was about to uncover.

My eyes swept the room, noting the signs of his recent departure.

A jacket thrown carelessly on the chair.

Boots missing from their usual place. It felt wrong to invade his space, but my resolve hardened.

I needed to know. I began searching, my movements quick and methodical.

Each drawer and hidden corner was a new lead or a dead end.

Guilt gnawed at me, but the drive to uncover the truth was stronger.

Under the mattress, I found it—a leather pouch, worn and inconspicuous. My pulse

quicken, and I opened it with hands that trembled despite my efforts to stay calm. The contents spilled into my lap, damning in their clarity.

Letters.

They were marked with the seal of Silver Ridge, Alaric Sterling's mark unmistakable even in the dim light. I picked them up one by one, reading the words that confirmed my worst fears.

Ewan.

Alaric.

Their names linked by plans to overthrow me and take control of the stones. The correspondence detailed everything—the ambushes, the strategies, even Serena's role in their twisted game.

Once we have the stones, we'll no longer need either of them.

The final sentence seared itself into my mind, a brutal truth I couldn't escape. I felt something break inside me, a fracture that ran deeper than any wound I'd ever taken.

How long had he been planning this? How had I been so blind?

The footsteps came suddenly, jolting me into action. They were quick and purposeful, heading straight for the room. Panic surged, and I shoved the letters back into the pouch, replacing it with shaking hands.

I slipped into the shadows just as the door swung open.

Ewan entered, his expression tight and wary.

Mud clung to his boots, and the scent of Silver Ridge tainted the air around him.

I watched him from my hiding place, the betrayal cutting into me with every breath he took.

This was the wolf I'd trusted with my life, and he'd sold me out to our worst enemy.

My heart pounded with the need to confront him, but the timing wasn't right.

Not yet. Not until I had a plan that wouldn't put Serena or the pack in more danger.

Ewan moved through the room, his actions too precise, too controlled.

Did he know I'd been here? Was he already aware of how close I'd come to unraveling his secrets?

I held my ground, silent and still, as he sniffed around the room. The urge to reveal myself, to force the truth out of him, burned in my chest. But I waited. I needed him to believe I hadn't figured it out yet.

When he finally turned away, leaving the door ajar, I slipped out behind him. The hallway swallowed me in shadows, but my path was clear now. I couldn't let Ewan's betrayal destroy everything I'd fought to protect.

Even if it meant tearing my own heart out in the process. I looked down at the mark on my shoulder. It pulsed—bright, angry, alive. A reminder that fate doesn't wait for anyone. And neither would I.

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### Chapter nine

Serena

The walls seemed to close in on me, turning my chamber into a cozy prison as I flipped through the ancient tomes Tristan gave me earlier tonight.

Celestial stones, moons, curses—they swam before my eyes like taunting riddles.

The candle's dim glow painted everything in murky shades of dread, but I couldn't let it go.

Not now. Not with so much on the line. Just when I thought my brain might leak out of my ears, a soft tap sounded at the door.

I found a letter waiting like a time bomb.

Lila's hurried scrawl sent a shiver up my spine before I even opened it.

Her words left me gutted, barely able to hold the paper steady as I read.

My father had been playing puppet master all along.

Years of manipulation, and with help from inside Stormvale.

The air left my lungs, anger simmering like a storm ready to blow.

He'd been stringing me along, the bastard.

Playing me like one of his stupid chess pieces.

He knew. About everything. The stones. The prophecy. Me. And he used me anyway. The letter spelled it out in cruel clarity—Alaric hadn't just withheld the truth. He'd helped orchestrate this, feeding information to someone inside Stormvale. Someone close to Tristan.

My stomach turned as I remembered the conversation I overheard from outside the cave when Tristan and I were attacked. Was it Ewan? The thought that someone here was feeding my father information made my skin crawl.

My hands shook as I left the room, the letter crumpled and ready to explode in my fist. I wanted to scream, but all that came out was a choked whisper of disbelief.

How could he do this? It wasn't enough to keep me caged my whole life; he had to reach into this one too, using some traitor to mess with my head.

I picked up my pace, my breathing uneven, as if my body couldn't keep up with the chaos in my mind.

I found Tristan hunched over a desk that looked like a warzone of maps and scattered papers. He didn't notice me until I slammed the door, making him jerk upright.

"Serena?" His icy blue eyes pierced through me, filled with concern and maybe a hint of fear. I wondered if he knew, if everyone but me had been in on this sick little game.

"Years," I said, shoving the letter in front of him. "He's been doing this for years."

Tristan scanned Lila's note, his jaw tightening with every word. "Alaric." He stood so suddenly his chair scraped backward. "He knew we were fated." His voice was low, dangerous. "He's been planning this since before you and I ever met."

"Alaric," I echoed, the name tasting like ash in my mouth. "And someone here. Some asshole in this pack."

He pushed the maps aside, making room for me. "Let's figure this out. All of it."

I sat next to him, my anger morphing into a tight, hot knot of determination. We spread the maps across the desk, marking the places that mattered. Each circle felt like a stab wound.

"Here," Tristan pointed, "where we first captured you."

"Not captured," I corrected, heat flaring up my neck. "Where I was stupid enough to get caught."

"Serena—" His voice was softer now, like he was trying to take the edge off. It wasn't working.

"No, it makes sense," I interrupted, piecing the puzzle together with each ragged breath. "My pack doesn't trust me. Never did. They send me away, knowing you'd grab me. Keeping me here like some sort of—"

"Pawn," Tristan finished, anger threading his words. He pulled a map closer. "They had to know you'd end up with me. They counted on it."

I glanced at him, feeling something thaw between us. It scared me. It excited me. I twisted a lock of hair around my finger, trying to keep my emotions in check. "It's the curse, isn't it? Alaric wants to break it, and he'll do anything to get those stones."

“And he doesn’t care who gets hurt in the process.” Tristan looked at me, really looked at me, like he was seeing more than the mess of a girl sitting next to him.

I felt my birthmark tingle under his gaze, an electric pulse that made the air around us shimmer. Our fingers brushed as we both reached for the same map, and I saw it—felt it—glow.

He pulled back, eyes flickering to mine. “We can do this. Together.”

I took a breath, the knot in my chest loosening just enough to speak. “I’m done playing his games.”

Tristan nodded, rolling the map up with careful hands. “Then let’s end this.”

We stood, side by side, united against the tide of betrayal threatening to swallow us whole. My heart drummed a wild rhythm, keeping time with the chaos, the hope, and the anger still burning strong. Tristan’s hands found their way to my waist and pulled me closer to him, his gaze locked on mine.

My breath caught as Tristan stepped in, closing the distance like the weight of everything between us had finally broken. His eyes searched mine—not for permission, but for confirmation. That I was here. That I was his. That I wanted this, too.

I did. Gods help me, I did.

I rose on my toes and met him halfway. The kiss wasn't gentle. It was heat and fury, defiance and need. His hands tightened at my waist, pulling me flush against him, and I wrapped my fingers into the back of his shirt, holding on like he was the only real thing left in the world.

Everything we'd held back came pouring out. The betrayal, the hurt, the impossible pull between us. His mouth moved over mine like he was starving for answers only I could give. I tasted fire and rage and something terrifyingly close to hope.

For a moment, the world outside didn't exist. There was no curse. No prophecy. No packs, no fathers, no enemies at the gates.

There was only us.

And then—

A stark knock at the door snapped through the moment like a blade.

We broke apart, breathless. I could still feel the imprint of his mouth on mine, the echo of something we hadn't meant to give each other but had anyway.

“Motherfucker,” Tristan growled, already moving. The loss of his touch sent a chill rushing in where the heat had been.

“This better be important,” he barked, yanking open the door.

Renna stood on the other side, backlit by torchlight and carrying the weight of something serious in her gaze. “I'm sorry to disturb you, Alpha, but you have a visitor.” Her eyes flicked past him to me. “Alaric is demanding to see you—both of you.”

Alaric.

Of course.

The puppet master never missed his curtain call.

I straightened, the high of the kiss dissolving into cold fury. Whatever he wanted, he'd have to go through both of us now.

The forest wrapped around us, heavy and breathless, like it was holding in a secret.

I stood there, feeling as if I might shatter from the weight of everything I was about to do.

Tristan's presence was solid next to me, a silent promise.

Alaric arrived at the border with an air of inevitability, like he knew we'd be waiting.

His face was worn, exhaustion etched into the lines around his mouth, but determination burned bright in his eyes.

I braced myself against the flood of old loyalties and fresh anger.

My voice was sharper than the crisp autumn air.

"You've been playing us all, haven't you?" I asked. The hurt must have shown on my face, because he flinched.

"Everything I've done has been to free you from this curse," he said. I wasn't ready to believe him, not after everything.

"Even working with someone here?" I shot back, feeling Tristan tense beside me. Alaric's eyes flickered to him, then back to me.

"He is not meant for you," he said, a harsh edge to his voice. "This connection you feel is nothing but a distraction from your true purpose." I felt the words cut through me, raw and real. Was he right? Or was this just another one of his manipulations?

Silence stretched between us, as taut and ready to snap as the anger coiled inside me.

Tristan was a constant presence at my side, radiating an intensity that matched my own.

Alaric took a step closer, and I fought the instinct to flinch.

His eyes, so much like my own, bore into me, searching for a crack in my resolve.

“Serena,” he said, softer now, like he was pleading with me to understand. “I’m trying to save you. Please, come home.”

For a flicker of a second, I remembered him tucking a dried moonflower into my hand the night I shifted for the first time, telling me it was the only thing in the world more stubborn than me.

He hadn’t looked afraid then. Just tired.

Maybe even proud. Maybe that’s why this moment hurt more than anything else.

“Save me?” My voice rose, bitter and wild. “Is that what you call locking me up and lying to me my whole life? I don’t have a home in Silver Ridge, I never have. It’s a prison.”

He took a breath, like he was about to launch into one of his lectures. But he hesitated, barely even bothering to look me in the eyes. “I’ve done what I had to do.”

“You’ve done what you wanted,” I snapped, the words spilling out like venom. “Kept me in the dark. Shoved me into situations you couldn’t control. All for what?”

“To keep you alive.” The words rang with a conviction that made something inside

me tremble.

I glanced at Tristan, needing his steady presence more than ever. His gaze met mine, solid and unwavering. He understood. He didn't have to say it; he knew what it was like to be used, to be played.

"Alive doesn't mean anything if I'm your puppet." My voice cracked, but I didn't care. "You think I want to live like that?"

"I think you don't know what you're risking," Alaric said, and for the first time, he looked truly afraid. Not for himself, but for me. It threw me off balance, like everything else in the past few days.

"Maybe it's worth the risk." I said it softly, a whisper against the looming threat of his plans.

"Maybe?" Alaric seized on the word. "You're willing to gamble everything?"

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“Maybe she is.” Tristan’s voice cut in, sharp and sure.

Alaric’s eyes darkened, locking onto Tristan with an intensity that felt like a physical blow. “And what do you think you can give her? Freedom? Love?” His voice was mocking, cruel in its certainty. “Those are not for her.”

“You don’t get to decide that,” I said, feeling something break free inside me. “Not anymore.”

He turned back to me, desperation clawing at his features. “Serena, the curse—”

“The curse?” I laughed, a harsh sound that held no real humor. “Or you? Which one am I really running from?”

His expression changed, hardened, as if a wall slammed down between us. “You’ll see,” he said, his voice low and steady. “One day, you’ll understand why I did this.”

“I hope I never do.” The words were a final, bitter farewell, leaving a void where trust and loyalty used to live.

Alaric turned, his steps slow but resolute, as if he still believed he could outpace the truth. I watched him go, my heart a mess of tangled emotions, my mind replaying his parting shot like a broken record.

Tristan was silent, but I felt the weight of his questions, the heaviness of all we still didn’t know. Was Alaric right about the curse, about us? About the cost of this path we were on? I didn’t want to think so, but the doubt had been planted, taking root in

the chaos of my heart.

I wrapped my arms around myself, the chill of uncertainty sinking deep into my bones. Tristan reached for me, but I pulled away, not ready for the comfort he offered, not ready to face what it might mean. Not yet.

Needing to be alone, I took off toward the trees lining the edge of the mountain near the base of the Stormvale compound.

The grove embraced me like an old friend, its ancient trees towering and still, a stark contrast to the chaos I felt inside.

The scent of earth and moss was thick, grounding, but even that wasn't enough to keep the doubts from flooding in.

I traced my birthmark, desperate for a sign, some proof that Alaric was wrong about everything.

That I was more than the curse. It shimmered faintly under my touch, a soft reminder of Tristan and his unwavering presence.

I sank against the bark, letting it cool my overheated skin, trying to silence my father's voice echoing in my mind.

But it was relentless, and my thoughts raced in wild, unending circles.

When Tristan found me, I was teetering on the edge, too wrapped up to notice the commotion brewing back at the compound. The crack of a branch and the sound of shouts finally tore through my daze, and I saw the urgency in his eyes. Trouble was coming. Fast.

I buried my face in my hands, trying to dam the rising tide of doubt.

Alaric's voice was a constant, nagging whisper.

Everything I've done. Everything I've done.

Was this bond with Tristan really nothing more than a distraction, like he said?

I wanted to scream, to run, to do anything but sit with this suffocating uncertainty. But all I could do was sit.

My birthmark shimmered faintly, Tristan's face flashing in my mind like a lifeline. I wanted to believe that meant something. That it meant I could be more than this curse. I breathed deeply, pulling in the damp, woody air, letting it fill the hollow spaces where fear had burrowed.

I felt his presence before I saw him. He moved through the grove with the kind of confidence that made me wish I could believe as easily as he seemed to.

When his eyes met mine, a jumble of emotions passed through me, each as intense as the last. Relief.

Doubt. A longing that made my heart clench painfully in my chest.

"Serena." He said my name like it was a promise. I didn't know what kind. I didn't know if I wanted to.

"Tristan," I replied, wrapping my arms around my knees. "Tell me I'm not crazy. Tell me this is real."

He came closer, his gaze never leaving mine. "You're not crazy. This is real."

“How do you know?” My voice trembled, betraying me.

“Because it feels like this,” he said, reaching for my hand. The moment his skin touched mine, a jolt ran up my arm, bright and unmistakable.

The world seemed to right itself, if only for a second. The knot of confusion loosened just enough for me to breathe without feeling like it was a chore. I let my fingers linger on his, grounding myself in the warmth of his touch.

“You’re scared,” he said, matter-of-fact, not judging, just knowing.

“Damn right, I’m scared.” I looked away, focusing on the rough bark of the tree, the patterns like ancient scars. “What if he’s right? What if we’re just setting ourselves up for more pain?”

Tristan didn’t answer right away. He didn’t need to. The truth was, I didn’t know if I could handle being let down again.

“I can’t promise you anything,” he finally said, squeezing my hand, making me feel something other than lost.

The forest shifted around us, no longer just a backdrop to my misery but a living, breathing presence. The shouts of wolves broke the quiet, growing louder, more insistent. Tristan tensed, instincts kicking in.

“What’s that?” I asked, the unease in my gut twisting into full-blown alarm.

He glanced toward the compound, his expression sharp with worry. “Trouble.”

I stood, legs shaky but functional. “The kind we can’t handle?”

“The kind that doesn’t wait for us to figure it out.”

We moved through the grove together, urgency speeding our steps. I matched his pace, the rhythm of our running an echo of something deeper, something unspoken but felt.

Behind us, the grove stood tall and silent, its secrets safe for now. Ahead, uncertainty loomed as large and as real as the bond we shared, pulling us into its messy embrace.

The compound was a storm of chaos, wolves everywhere, a blur of fur and fangs and rage.

We skidded to a halt, barely processing the scene before it shifted and changed again.

Ewan was at the heart of it, rallying the pack with accusations and shouts.

His voice cut through the noise, every word a stab at Tristan.

“Your obsession with this outsider has weakened you,” he yelled.

“The pack deserves a leader who puts Stormvale first.” The words struck with brutal clarity, and I saw wolves breaking ranks, half joining Ewan while others hesitated, caught in the growing divide.

Tristan’s expression was a mix of anger and something deeper, an old hurt opening fresh and raw.

“Ewan!” he called out, but his voice was lost in the uproar.

It was a coup. It hit like a gut punch. Before I could react, Tristan’s hand was on mine, pulling me away from the fray.

“We need to go. Now,” he said, the urgency in his voice cutting through the confusion and fear.

We turned to race back toward the trees, dodging the chaos left and right.

The noise was deafening, a storm of snarls and yelps and bodies crashing against each other as they defended their side. Ewan stood on a raised platform, like some twisted ringmaster in the center of a violent circus. His brown eyes glinted with a fervor that chilled me to the bone.

“You've lost your way, Tristan,” Ewan shouted, his words cutting through the clamor like a knife. “You've lost your right to lead.”

I felt Tristan's grip on my hand tighten, a reflexive clench against the betrayal that surrounded us.

The wolves were splitting before our eyes.

Some looked back at Tristan, uncertain, their loyalty stretching like a thin, fragile thread.

Others turned away, heads low as they sided with Ewan, falling in line with the harsh certainty of his accusations.

“Tristan, what do we do?” My voice sounded small, even to me.

He looked at me, the fury in his eyes barely masking a deeper, older hurt. “We don't have a choice,” he said. His jaw set in determination, the kind that comes when you've lost everything and have nothing left but to fight your way back.

I didn't want to leave, not like this. But Ewan's voice rose again, and the raw, animal

intensity of it sent a chill through me.

“He’ll drag you down with him, Serena!” Ewan’s gaze locked onto mine, fierce and sure. “You don’t belong here. You were born to betray us.”

The words hit harder than they should have, given all I’d been through. Given how many times I’d heard them before. I wasn’t going to hear them again, not if I could help it. Tristan pulled me closer, his expression shifting from anger to something sharper, more urgent.

“Trust me,” he said, low and fierce.

And I did. Despite everything. Maybe because of everything.

We turned from the chaos, sprinting for the cover of the forest. My heart thundered in my chest, a wild rhythm of fear and defiance and raw, unyielding hope.

Tristan's eyes met mine, a silent understanding passing between us as the chaos of the coup faded into the distance.

Without a word, he never broke stride as his form began to shift and blur in a mesmerizing dance of transformation.

Rich black fur sprouted from his ankles first all the way up his back, the sound of his bones snapping loudly just as he dropped to all fours.

In a matter of seconds, Tristan became the fierce alpha wolf with fur as dark as midnight running before me.

Time seemed to slow down as I watched in awe, the air crackling with an electric energy that tingled on my skin.

Heart pounding in my chest, I felt a surge of something primal stir within me, an ancient call that echoed through my veins.

As if in a trance, I let go of all hesitation and embraced the wild magic coursing through my being.

With a rush of power and sensation, my own body twisted and contorted, morphing into the sleek form of a silver-haired wolf as we sprinted through the woods.

My senses exploded—the sharp tang of pine needles, the whisper of a squirrel too high in the trees, the power of my limbs as they hit the ground in rhythm with his.

For once, I wasn't running away. I was running with him.

We moved fast, too fast to think about anything other than putting distance between us and the madness behind. The trees blurred past, a streak of green and brown and shadow as we tore through the woods. I stumbled, my lungs burning, but Tristan was there, always there, pulling me forward.

“Serena, keep up,” he called in my mind, urgency lacing every word.

I pushed harder, matching his pace, matching the desperation that fueled our flight.

When we finally halted, breathless and exhausted, I couldn't tell if the trembling in my legs was from running or the adrenaline of knowing we'd just left everything behind.

I met Tristan's eyes, saw the same mix of disbelief and grim determination reflected in them.

We quickly shifted back into our human forms to catch our breath.

“That was—” I started, but couldn’t finish. Words felt inadequate for the enormity of what had just happened.

“A clusterfuck,” Tristan said, raw and ragged. It was the most honest thing I’d ever heard.

We stood there, in the dark embrace of the forest, letting the magnitude of our escape settle over us.

I didn’t know what was next, but I knew I wasn’t alone.

Not in this, not in anything. I clung to that as fiercely as I’d clung to Tristan’s hand.

As fiercely as I’d clung to my hope, despite everything.

We didn’t look back. Not at the fire behind us, not at the betrayal. Only forward—into the night, into the unknown, into whatever fate had left for two wolves born to defy it.

### Chapter ten

Tristan

I pushed forward, my lungs burning and legs heavy.

The forest blurred past in smears of shadow and moonlight, and my ears pounded with each thud of pursuit behind us.

Ewan and his new allies were relentless.

They followed like a curse I couldn't shake, intent on taking her from me.

The fury and chaos, the last moments of indecision before my gut overrode my loyalty to a pack that wasn't what I thought it was.

I had grabbed Serena by the wrist and pulled her into the night, a storm of wolves snapping at our heels.as we left.

A shout rang out somewhere to my left, close enough to shoot adrenaline through my exhausted legs.

We tore through trees and thickets, leaping fallen logs in frenzied zigzags as we tried to shake them.

And when the first silver bullets flew past, I almost lost it.

This was war. If we didn't find some way to hide, some fucking miracle, they would catch us before sunrise.

Serena ran beside me, her eyes narrowed with fierce determination, matching my stride with strength I didn't expect.

A fallen branch snagged my foot, sending me crashing forward.

She caught my arm, her grip firm and unyielding, hoisting me back to my feet.

No words passed between us; they weren't needed. We both knew what was at stake.

I forced myself on, each breath a ragged gulp, each step a jolt of pain.

I wasn't sure how long we could last like this.

They were fresh and focused, fueled by the belief they were doing the right thing.

It made them ruthless, a threat I couldn't underestimate.

I cursed Ewan and every memory I had of his loyalty.

How had he turned so easily? It all circled back to the fucking curse.

If I'd never met Serena, never found out what she meant to me, we wouldn't be in this position.

But I'd be lying if I said I regretted it.

Her presence was like a pulse of energy, pushing me forward, keeping me alive.

Another shout cut through the night, followed by a howl of triumph. They were closing in. Panic clawed at my gut. They'd spread out, and our erratic trail would only confuse them for so long. We needed to find cover. We needed—

Light.

My eyes caught the barest flicker in the distance, and for a second, I thought I imagined it. I slowed, my senses tingling with something new, something strange.

“Tristan?” Serena’s voice was breathless and raw, but the question in it was sharp.

I turned toward the light, praying I wasn’t leading us to our capture. “This way!”

We veered right, into a dense grove where the trees grew so close they almost touched.

The lights grew brighter, weaving in and out of the forest like spectral flames.

As we ran toward them, the ground dipped sharply, and we stumbled, nearly losing our balance.

What I first thought was a cliff or ravine came into view, its edges defined by towering arches and massive stones.

I pulled Serena closer, blinking at what couldn’t be real.

Ancient ruins spread out before us, a vast and unexpected sanctuary hidden in the heart of the woods.

Celestial carvings adorned the weathered stone, glowing faintly under the moon’s soft touch.

It was beautiful, eerie, and absolutely perfect.

I barely paused to consider the implications before I led her in.

The air shifted, charged with a current I felt down to my bones.

I knew this place, though I'd never been here before.

Legends spoke of it—an old ground, once neutral, where fae and wolves met under truce.

My father used to speak of this place like a bedtime fable—too sacred to touch, too ancient to find.

But it was real. And I'd brought her here.

That it still existed, tucked away like this, was something I didn't have time to consider. It was shelter. That's what mattered.

I held Serena's gaze, a silent agreement passing between us. Her eyes flashed with understanding, and she squeezed my hand, an anchor in the storm that chased us. I didn't need to ask if she trusted me. The fact that she was here, running at my side, was answer enough.

We moved deeper into the ruins, leaving the cover of trees for the maze of archways and chambers.

A strange rhythm echoed around us, the distant howl of our pursuers blending with the low hum of ancient power.

Each stone seemed alive, vibrating under my touch as I ran my hand along its surface.

The temperature dropped, a welcome relief from the heat of our escape.

I could breathe again, the tightness in my chest loosening as we put distance between ourselves and the hunt.

The moon poured through gaps in the ruin's ceiling, casting patterns on the ground that mirrored the marks we shared.

Her gaze lifted to the light-dappled floor, and her eyes widened—caught between wonder and dread.

The runes weren't just familiar—they pulsed with the same light as her mark.

The same magic I carried. This place wasn't just shelter.

It was connected to us. The shouts and howls grew faint, confused.

Ewan's men wouldn't dare come here, not without careful thought. I was counting on it.

"It's them or us," Serena said, the defiance in her voice cracking slightly under exhaustion.

"Us," I replied, and nodded toward a narrow passage that spiraled down, half-hidden by shadows and overgrown vines.

We ducked inside, moving fast, fear and adrenaline giving us speed even as our bodies threatened to give out.

The path twisted and turned, the ceiling so low I had to crouch.

At any other time, the ruins would have fascinated me.

Their raw, ancient beauty hinted at the power they held, and I itched to understand it.

But right now, we just needed to disappear.

Serena stumbled, catching herself against the wall.

She looked at me, the question in her eyes different now—can we stop?

I hesitated. They were so close. I could still feel them, sense the urgency of their chase.

But my lungs were on fire, my legs unwilling to move.

If I didn't stop, they'd be dragging me out of here unconscious.

I nodded, and we slid down against the cold stone. For a moment, neither of us spoke, our breath clouding like smoke in the cold, damp air.

“How long do you think we have?” she asked, wiping sweat from her brow with a trembling hand.

I watched her, my mind racing to assess, plan, and react all at once. “Long enough,” I said, my voice more confident than I felt.

I shifted closer to her, listening to her breathe, feeling the thrum of her pulse from a foot away.

It would have been easier to blame her for all of this.

To put the burden on her curse and her presence and the way she'd made me question everything I thought I knew.

Stormvale had raised me. Taught me strength.

Duty. I was supposed to lead them, not run from them like a ghost in the woods.

Instead, I found myself caring more than I ever thought I could.

I cared enough to betray my own blood, to run from the only life I'd known, to risk everything for her.

"Some hiding place," she said with a half-smile, looking around the crumbling walls and dirt-streaked floors.

"It's the last place they'll think to look."

"It's perfect, Tristan." Her voice was soft, an admission I felt more than heard. She leaned back, letting her eyes fall closed. "It's absolutely perfect."

And for a brief moment, we had time. Time to catch our breath, to wait for the next disaster, to wonder how it had all come to this.

Her head dropped against my shoulder, and the contact was electric.

The comfort it brought was bittersweet, reminding me of what we faced when the sun rose.

Just when I started to believe we were safe, the air shifted again—like something was watching.

The walls loomed around us, thick with the weight of old secrets.

Stones pulsed like living things, glinting with magic and dust as we pushed deeper into the ruins.

It was freezing, but we couldn't risk a fire.

Not yet. Not when there was even the slightest chance Ewan's men would find us.

Serena pulled my coat tight around her shoulders, stubbornly refusing to complain.

I'd wrapped it around her when she fell asleep, sitting guard like an idiot for half the night.

She could've been kidnapped, and I wouldn't have fucking noticed.

Her head was still on my shoulder when I woke up, stiff and cold and afraid they'd catch us before we even had a chance to fight.

At least this time, they didn't have the scent of our fear to follow. Maybe we were finally one step ahead.

I grabbed Serena's hand, hauling her to her feet. She flinched, and I knew how it must've looked. Like I was panicking, making us run again. Like I couldn't handle what was about to happen. Maybe she wasn't wrong.

"We should go," I said, almost pulling her toward the entrance.

"Not without knowing what we're up against," she said, yanking back. "You saw the walls. The carvings." Her eyes glowed with intensity, sharper than I'd ever seen them. "This is what we need. It's right here, Tristan."

My chest tightened, frustration and fear grinding together until I could barely breathe. I knew she was right. I hated that she was right.

“Then we read fast and get the hell out,” I said, my voice harsh in the cold air.

We moved toward the main chamber, wide-eyed and frantic. The stones radiated with eerie light, illuminating runes and symbols I hadn’t noticed when we first hid here. It was more than I’d seen in any of the legends. More than I thought was possible.

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*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:07 am*

The air shimmered with old magic, thick with dust and forgotten oaths.

Every breath I took felt like it belonged to another time.

The stones hummed under my boots, whispering secrets in a language I didn't yet understand.

My father used to say these stones drank blood and memory. I never believed him—until now.

Serena ran her fingers along the carved stone, the runes glowing faintly under her touch. I leaned in, trying to concentrate, forcing myself to see beyond the immediate danger. Old wolf runes covered the walls in spirals, broken by fae symbols I never learned to read. But I knew someone who had.

“Here,” Serena said, pointing to a section near the floor. Her voice was breathless. “This part—it's like the texts my father kept hidden.”

Alaric Sterling. That bastard. I should've known he was playing a bigger game than I realized.

I crouched beside her, translating aloud. My voice was low, the words raw and hard. “Celestial stones...bound to wolves...meant to be...temporary.” I paused, struggling to make sense of it.

“This one,” she whispered, tracing the symbol of a wolf devouring its own tail, “it means... cycle or curse?”

“Both,” I answered, voice low. “Look here—‘Where the moon is fractured, the bond shall test. Love forged in shadow, peace bought with power lost.’”

A hush fell between us as realization sank in. We were the wolf now—teeth poised, tail just out of reach. But maybe, this time, we could let go.

I didn’t know whether to laugh or punch something. The connection had always been there, right under my nose. This place, the ruins, the carvings—they all tied back to us. And I was a blind fucking fool not to see it sooner.

“So if we break the curse...” Serena said slowly, “Stormvale loses its strength.”

“Not all of it,” I replied. “But the mountain, the connection my wolves have to it—it’ll fade. We’ve drawn on that magic for generations. In war. In ritual. It’s why we survive winters others don’t. Why our wolves are larger, faster.”

Serena stepped back, hand trembling. “You’d lose that. Because of me.”

It all made sense, more than I wanted it to. We were part of a story that began long before either of us was born. The way we were drawn to each other, the pain that came with it, the packs’ endless conflict. It was written in stone, spelled out by forces older than I dared imagine.

The full impact of it hit me like a storm, drowning out everything else. Breaking the curse meant severing my pack’s bond with the mountain. The very thing that made us who we were.

I staggered back, the room spinning.

“Tristan?” Serena’s voice was distant, like I was hearing it through water. “What is it?”

Everything. Everything was at stake. My head pounded with the realization, each thought more unbearable than the last. My duty was to protect them, the wolves I led and bled with.

How could I choose to weaken them, to doom them for her?

Even if we're both driven mad by this curse, how can I choose us over the pack?

"I need air," I choked out, the words barely making it past the tightness in my throat.

I pushed away, retreating into the corridor where the walls didn't press in so closely. Where I could breathe without feeling like I was suffocating on my own fucking failure. My hands trembled, and I clenched them into fists as my wolf bristled beneath the surface, desperate to stay in control.

The decision felt impossible. No matter what choice I made, I'd lose a part of myself. The part that had lived and fought for the pack, the part that found its soul in Serena's touch. How did it come to this?

I paced, running a hand through my hair, gripping the back of my neck, feeling the coarse material of my flannel shirt.

I wanted to smash through the walls, to howl and rage against everything I couldn't change.

My palm brushed my birthmark, and I stopped, the action stabbing into me with sharp clarity.

She was behind me, her presence so real I felt it before she spoke. "This is why you ran, isn't it?"

I turned, my eyes meeting hers. There was no judgment in them, no anger at what this all meant. Just a deep, raw understanding that gutted me more than anything else could.

“Tell me,” she said, stepping closer. “I need to hear you say it, Tristan.”

The distance between us felt wider than ever.

I’d already given up everything to be with her.

Everything but this final, most brutal choice.

I swallowed hard, each word like glass in my throat.

“My duty has always been to protect my pack. I don’t know how I can...

” My voice cracked, and I closed the space between us, almost desperate.

“How can I choose to weaken them? To put you first when it means...”

She caught my hand, the one that was still hovering over my birthmark. “You’ve always been stronger than you think,” she said, her grip fierce and unrelenting. “This isn’t just your burden to carry.”

It was like a jolt to my senses, a moment of clarity that sliced through my confusion. She was right. Maybe we didn’t have to make this choice alone. Maybe the past wasn’t as unforgiving as the stones wanted us to believe.

“Look,” Serena said, glancing back at the chamber we’d just left. “There’s more. We’ve only scratched the surface.”

Her determination was contagious. Her presence, her faith, her stubborn refusal to let me give up—it pulled me out of the dark spiral I was in.

I followed her gaze, knowing we didn't have long before everything caught up with us.

But for the first time, I felt like maybe we weren't out of options.

Maybe this time, we'd find a way to win.

After studying the ancient runes and carvings for hours, night slipped into the ruins like a ghost, chilling the walls and silencing even the bravest insects.

It was the kind of quiet that wrapped itself around you, that heightened every breath, every glance, every shared and secret thought.

We hadn't meant to stay this long, but we needed answers, and this was the one place we finally found them.

We moved into the farthest chamber, alone in the dark, our hearts pounding with the fear of discovery and the heavy pull of unsaid things.

Shadows pooled like ink at the edges, leaving only the center aglow with pale, otherworldly light.

It cast strange patterns on Serena's skin, making her look as beautiful and unattainable as ever.

Like the curse itself, only this time, I had the insane hope we might actually break it.

She stayed near, never out of reach, always a magnet for my body and my mind.

She let me see what it was doing to her, holding my gaze with eyes that sparked when I couldn't stand the silence.

"You've carried this burden alone for too long," she said, touching my face like I was something fragile. I closed the distance between us and watched the dark curl of her mouth just before I claimed it.

The kiss was hesitant at first, tentative like we didn't quite believe this was real.

I felt her breath hitch against my lips, the warmth of it slipping into me and fanning out until I couldn't hold back anymore.

She opened up, pressing against me, and the kiss grew hungry, then desperate, then consuming.

It was everything I hadn't let myself feel until now, everything I thought I could sacrifice to protect her and the pack.

But she was here, soft and unrelenting, breaking through every wall I built around myself.

The first sounds she made were quiet, catching at the back of her throat as I tangled my hands in her hair.

My coat slipped from her shoulders, falling to the ground and leaving her bare but for the thin white t-shirt that clung to her.

She didn't wait for me to help, pulling it over her head and moving back in with a fierce need that undid me.

Her skin was smooth and pale in the half-light, a contrast to the chaos inside me, the

tangle of muscle and emotion I could hardly contain.

I lifted her up, feeling the warmth of her legs wrap around me, feeling like I finally had everything I couldn't admit I wanted.

We crashed against the wall, each impact sweet and desperate, each touch more electrifying than the last. My mouth moved to her neck, to her shoulder, to the hollow of her throat.

She gasped, pulling at my shirt until I felt the heat of her against every inch of me. We didn't speak. We didn't need to.

Every movement was instinct, every sound she made driving me closer to a loss of control that was terrifying and perfect all at once I laid her down, our bodies slipping together like we'd done this in another life.

Like every wound, every betrayal had led us here—to this one chance to get it right.

She pulled me down to her, wrapped around me like she'd never let go.

Like she never had to. I kissed her again, fierce and unrestrained, the taste of her, the feel of her, the knowing that she was mine and I was hers sparking something deep and primal.

Trailing kisses from her jaw to her throat, I made my way down her body.

Serena's breath hitched as my lips left a wake of fire across her skin.

Each touch, each caress, was a promise of raw need and searing desire.

She arched against me, the heat between us building with a fervor that matched the

intensity of our escape.

Serena's hands found my hair, fingers threading through the strands as if anchoring herself to the moment.

The air was alive with an unspoken truth between us - a raw, undeniable connection that transcended words.

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I lowered my head between her thighs, eager to taste her.

A low growl thundered from my chest when I saw how wet she was for me already.

I traced my tongue along her lips, teasing her even more before finding that sweet spot in the center.

Her back arched off the cold, ancient stone as a gasp escaped Serena's lips, her fingers clenching in my hair with a mixture of surprise and need.

The taste of her was intoxicating, primal, and I delved deeper, losing myself in the symphony of her moans and the salty tang of her desire.

Each swirl and flick of my tongue across her clit sent shivers rippling through her, igniting a fire that threatened to consume every coherent thought. I could scent the pleasure building within her like a gathering storm, each touch electric and demanding.

As I brought her to the brink of pleasure, every muscle in her body tensed with anticipation.

Her breath quickened, mingling with the soft sounds of ecstasy that filled the chamber, echoing off the ancient walls.

When she shattered around me, a cry torn from the depths of her soul.

It was raw and primal, and the sexiest fucking thing I'd ever heard.

I pulled back and my lips instantly found Serena's as I gripped her waist, pulling her into me.

"Tell me you want this," I whispered, rough with need but raw with fear.

"Even if it breaks the mountain. Even if it breaks me . " The intensity of needing her like I needed air to breathe was all-consuming. But I needed to hear her say it.

"I want you," she echoed, and I nearly came undone. I needed her. Now. I settled myself between her legs and positioned my cock at her entrance. Her hips rose to meet me, and in one deep thrust I gave her everything. Everything.

We moved together, a furious rhythm that was wild and tender and more real than anything I'd ever known.

Each thrust took us closer, sent us spiraling into a release that was pure and raw and fucking beautiful.

The tension of the last weeks, the last years, melted away.

And for the first time, I didn't feel like I was at war with the world.

For the first time, I let myself believe.

Serena wrapped her legs around my waist, squeezing tighter as her fingers knotted in my hair. Her walls shuddered around me, and I knew she was close to the edge.

"Tristan!" she cried out as her nails raked down my back, riding the wave of her pleasure.

Hearing my name on her lips urged me on as I quickened my pace.

I felt that familiar tingle creep up my spine and I knew I was close too.

My fingers braced Serena's hips with a bruising grip, slamming into her harder and deeper with every thrust.

"Fuck —" The word shattered from me as I came, every piece of me pouring into her, like I was finally free.

Like I was hers. Our birthmarks lit up as we finally found the edge, glowing so bright they almost hurt to look at.

They pulsed in time with our bodies, with the frantic beating of our hearts.

We tipped over, falling, falling, lost in each other and the glow that surrounded us.

It was freedom and fulfillment, a claiming and a release. It was us, finally, without restraint.

The stones around us responded, flashing in colors so vivid I wondered if the walls would hold.

It was like the whole ruin came alive, a frenzy of light and power that fueled us, pushed us further, drew us in.

We found it together, the edge, the brink, the everything.

It was sweet and painful and perfect. It was us.

Time slipped away, the outside world forgotten in the haze of tangled limbs and shared breath.

We were sweat-slicked and exhausted, both of us unguarded in a way I'd never imagined possible.

My coat was beneath us, and I realized she'd wrapped me in it, the warm weight covering both our bodies.

She was wrapped around me too, our heartbeats slowing, falling into sync.

I brushed her golden auburn hair back, tracing the delicate line of her jaw, the smooth curve of her shoulder, the faint crescent on her wrist that shimmered in the dim light.

It didn't seem fair, how beautiful she was.

How impossibly lucky I was to be here with her, with us, with everything we could be if I didn't fuck it up.

I pulled her closer, unwilling to let go.

The glow of the stones softened, the pulse of magic quieting until the ruin was a shadowed cocoon around us. It felt like peace, like possibility. But even in the silence, even in the comfort of her body and her touch, I knew we weren't safe. Not yet.

Moonlight streamed through tiny cracks in the stones, illuminating the chamber just enough to make out some of the runes. My gaze focused on a particular carving, a crescent shape that felt familiar.

"Wait—Tristan, the crescent rune," Serena said. "The moonlight just hit it."

A metallic grind shattered the calm, a hidden compartment in the wall sliding open with unexpected force. We both tensed, the moment of reprieve evaporating. I sat up,

ready to protect her from whatever fresh hell was coming. But it wasn't a threat, not exactly.

Inside the chamber, an ancient scrying bowl sat on a ledge, filled to the brim with dark water. Moonlight caught its surface, and an image swirled into focus. It took a moment to register, a moment for my brain to catch up with what I was seeing.

Ewan. Alaric. The celestial altar. They stood at the center of it all, preparing for something that looked a hell of a lot like a ritual.

Serena was beside me, clutching my arm, watching with wide eyes as the scene unfolded.

"They're going to use the stones' power," she said, her voice trembling with a mix of disbelief and anger.

"To destroy us both," I said, feeling the weight of the truth settle like a stone in my gut. They weren't just after us. They wanted to corrupt the power and take control. Permanently.

The water shimmered, showing the crescent moon in the sky above the altar. It was nearly full. I did the math in my head, felt my stomach twist at the realization. Two days. We had two fucking days.

"This isn't over," I said, gripping her hand so tight it must've hurt. But she didn't pull away. "We need to move now, before it's too late."

"Then we fight," Serena said, her eyes locked on mine, fierce and unyielding. "Together."

I felt the echo of her words through every part of me, the promise of what we were,

what we could be, what we had to be if we were going to win. I felt the hope of it, the power. I felt everything.

It would have to be enough.

### Chapter eleven

Serena

The moonlight barely kissed the forest floor as we moved through it, my breath loud in the thick silence.

The air clung to me, damp and heavy, sticking to my skin like the feeling that everything was about to go very wrong.

Tristan signaled for me to follow, but I was already right behind him, my wolf instincts snapping with every shift in the shadows.

He moved like the trees themselves, parting the night and winding between the roots and branches, his gaze sharp and unyielding.

I was a little less smooth, my heart pounding against the restraints of my chest as Ewan's guards cut us off at every path, surrounding the compound like a chokehold.

Every step was like walking through a trap that had my name on it.

I kept expecting one of the guards to call out, for us to get surrounded, for things to go to hell.

The only thing that moved faster than my feet was the clock ticking down in my head.

Tristan's gaze flashed back at me, bright and piercing, cutting through the dark like he could slice a path to where we needed to be.

And then it wasn't just guards; it was all the little things Ewan had changed about the compound.

Strange places for sentries, new barriers in the woods—things that made no sense unless he knew we were coming.

The air was different too, less like the powerful pack I remembered and more like a den of panic and uncertainty.

The stench of fear was a heavy cloak, stifling and suffocating, a testament to Ewan's rule.

It crawled along the forest floor, seeped through the mountain cracks, and set my nerves ablaze.

Tristan gave me a signal to hold, then pointed out a less-guarded path through the thick trees.

I barely nodded, my wolf senses screaming as I followed him, half expecting to run straight into an ambush.

He was calm and sure, every move deliberate, like nothing could touch him, like nothing would dare.

A sudden rustling of the trees and branches snapping underfoot stopped us in our tracks.

Tristan positioned himself in front of me, bracing for whatever was headed our way.

As a familiar face and ash blonde hair stepped out of the trees, my jaw must have hit the floor, and I ran to throw my arms around her neck.

“Lila! What are you doing here?” My voice came out in a rush of disbelief and relief, my arms wrapping around her as if she were a lifeline in the chaos.

Lila's eyes held a mix of relief and urgency as she pulled back from our embrace, her voice hushed yet urgent. “Serena! Thank gods I found you. Your father's plans are darker than even I had feared. He used his alpha power to force the entire pack to Stormvale, claiming we'd be rid of you and the curse once and for all.

” Her words hung in the night air like an ominous premonition, sending shivers down my spine.

“Alaric's been working with my beta Ewan,” Tristan explained, turning his attention toward Lila. “They staged a coup so we fled, but we're on our way to stop them now. We have to break this curse before it's too late.”

“You might need this, then,” Lila replied, reaching into her backpack.

She pulled out a large stone with ancient carvings on it that illuminated the forest in an ethereal glow.

One of the celestial stones. It reminded me of the first time I'd seen the mark on Tristan's wrist—how it had glowed between us, uninvited but undeniable.

The stone pulsed the same way now, as if it remembered that night too.

Lila held the cracked stone in her hand, its glow dimmer now, fractured like the bond it represented.

“If you do this,” she said, “the mountain’s power won’t just vanish—it’ll scatter. You could destabilize everything. Stormvale’s sacred bond—its connection to the moon phases, to the mountain’s rhythm—it’ll all shatter. You’ll sever centuries of strength.”

“We know,” Tristan said.

“And for Serena...” Lila turned to me. “The curse is tied to the stones. If someone else uses them before you and Tristan complete the bond, it could lock the curse inside you permanently. Or worse...you’ll go mad.”

“So we’re out of time,” I said.

“You always were,” Lila whispered. “The mark never waits forever. Either you claim your mate now—or someone else will claim the stones. And whatever power remains.”

“What about you?” I asked.

“I’m going back to Stormvale to find a way to distract them while you two sneak in. Stay low and don’t get caught,” she replied, zipping her backpack up and throwing it back over her shoulder.

I tossed my arms around her neck for one last hug, gripping tightly. “I swear, we have to stop running into each other like this. Coffee, soon, okay?”

“Duh,” she answered swiftly, as if it was a guarantee we would all make it out of this alive. We had to. “Now go,” she ordered, motioning toward the tree line. I watched her disappear into the night again, wondering if this was the last time I’d see my best friend.

Tristan and I kept pushing on until we finally reached the tunnel he'd talked about, hidden beneath a curtain of moss and tangled roots.

I paused for a breath, knowing once we went in, there'd be no turning back.

It was old, this passage. Ancient. Tristan knew its secrets like he was the one who'd carved it into the mountain.

No words were needed; we slipped inside, the weight of the entire compound pressing down on us.

The walls were tight and stifling, crumbling stone that scraped against us as we pushed through.

I used to feel caged like this. Trapped by rules, by bloodlines, by the curse.

But now, crawling through this ancient artery of stone, I wasn't afraid.

I was focused. I was ready. We moved in tandem, his heat, his scent, his everything overwhelming in the tight confines.

Every nerve ending in me was lit up, both from the closeness and from the danger.

I couldn't tell which was more intense, which I craved more.

He shot a glance back, full of urgency and understanding, and it nearly took me out. The tunnel was longer than I expected, winding and endless. I wondered how many times he'd used it, if he'd ever planned on leading me through it.

Then I stopped wondering anything because we were at the end, bursting out into the open space inside the compound. I pulled in a sharp breath, tasting the mountain air.

For a second, it felt like we'd made it, like we'd outsmarted them, like we actually stood a chance.

And then I froze.

Alaric.

His scent hit me harder than the forest wind, stopping me cold. He was close, closer than I'd been prepared for. I'd been so focused on what Ewan was up to, I hadn't let myself think about what it would be like to face my father here. Now it was all I could think about. All I could feel.

I hesitated, torn between rushing to stop Ewan from finishing what he'd started and confronting the man who'd lied to me my entire life.

Tristan noticed, his eyes locking on mine with a mix of impatience and concern.

But even he knew what this meant to me, how much I needed to know why Alaric was here, what he was planning.

I thought slipping past Ewan's guards would be the hardest part. I hadn't prepared for the ache that hit when my father's scent flooded my lungs. It wasn't fear—it was betrayal, thick and bitter. And now I had to choose between ending the curse or finally facing the man who broke me.

The stones caught the light before Alaric did, glowing with an intensity that shot straight through me.

A sharp tingling sensation filled my veins the closer I got to the stones, my curse tied to the very essence of their magic.

The hum of the stones wasn't just noise anymore—it was a scream in my bones, a vibration I couldn't shut out.

The bastard was doing it. Really doing it.

I stood in the doorway, my heart split wide open and ready for the taking.

But not him. Never him. He turned away, not willing to let me in or keep me out, leaving me hovering in the same no-man's-land I'd been in for years.

“You've lied to me my entire life,” I said, a snarl cutting through the words.

He didn't flinch. Just kept arranging the stolen stones, eyes dodging mine like they always did when the truth was too close for comfort.

The room was a tangle of glowing artifacts and forgotten promises. I wanted to destroy every last one of them, to watch them burn as bright as the betrayal inside me. But I couldn't move. My feet felt rooted to the ground, my heart too raw to do anything but hurt.

Alaric still hadn't looked at me. Not really. It was like facing me was harder than any war he'd ever fought, like acknowledging what he'd done would take the life out of him. But what about me? What about everything I'd lost because of his secrets?

“You knew what these were,” I said, forcing the words past the lump in my throat. “And you kept it from me. From everyone. Do you even know what destroying them will do to the Stormvale pack?”

Finally, his eyes met mine. There was something in them, but I didn't know if it was shame or defiance or just plain exhaustion. “I did what I had to,” he said, each word clipped and full of old wounds. “For the pack. For you.”

I felt a snarl rise in me, hot and wild. “For me? This was never for me. You did it to control me.”

He turned his back again, the movement so cold and final I thought it might shatter me. “You don’t understand.”

I was shaking, rage and heartbreak bleeding through my skin. “Then make me understand.”

He hesitated, his hands faltering as they arranged the stones, shaking like he was an old man on the edge of something terrible. “It was the only way, Serena. The only way to break the curse.”

“You knew it wouldn’t work,” I spat, my voice cracking. “These stones never belonged to us, did they?”

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:07 am*

A silence stretched between us, thick and suffocating. I could see the tension in his shoulders, the way he almost turned around but didn't. "It was a chance," he said finally, his voice barely more than a whisper. "A chance I had to take."

"For what? To keep me tied to you? To make me think I was the problem?" I couldn't breathe. Couldn't think. The air was too thick with everything unsaid. "You were willing to sacrifice everything—both packs, innocent lives, even Tristan—just to control my destiny."

The name hit him like a blow. I saw it in the way he flinched, the way his hands clenched and unclenched over the stones. "You were supposed to be safe," he said, the old determination cracking, letting something more human seep through.

"Safe? Or miserable?"

His silence told me everything I needed to know.

I felt the full weight of it then, the years of half-truths and lies coming down on me like an avalanche. I'd spent my whole life believing I was cursed, that there was something wrong with me, and here was the man who could have changed it all. The man who should have.

The glow of the stones was a taunt, a reminder that he'd known all along and hadn't cared what it cost. I could see it in the way his eyes avoided mine, in the way he couldn't bring himself to speak.

He was caught between the father I wanted him to be and the alpha who'd do

anything to win.

Afterall, my curse was nothing more than a burden and embarrassment to him.

“You never intended for me to have a choice,” I said, my voice rough with the weight of what it meant.

“Choices aren’t always what they seem,” he said, the words more desperate than I expected.

“Everything I’ve done has been to free you from this curse...

I watched it kill your mother slowly. Not just her body—her spirit.

She was marked too. I didn’t save her. So I swore I’d do whatever it took to save you.

Even if it made you hate me. I was trying to protect you. ”

“I don’t need your protection.” It came out hard and fast, sharper than any blade. “I needed the truth.”

I didn’t get the apology. I didn’t get the truth.

But I got clarity. My father would never see me as more than something to protect, something to control.

And now, I had to protect myself. Protect all of us.

He’d sworn he was protecting me. But love that cages you isn’t love—it’s fear.

And I wasn’t afraid anymore. Maybe fate carved the path beneath my feet, but

choice—my choice—was the only weapon I had left to change where it led.

He looked like he was going to say something, but I didn't wait. Couldn't. The room was closing in, all the lies pressing down on me, making it impossible to breathe. I turned, the stones' glow following me like the curse, and ran straight into the hell I knew was waiting.

When I turned down the hall, I saw Tristan as soon as I heard the noise.

It was a brutal symphony, the clash and thud and crack of everything we weren't ready for.

Ewan's followers were everywhere, cutting off our escape, ripping apart what was left of me and Tristan's plans.

He fought like he'd never known what losing was, every punch and snarl a challenge, a dare.

I felt the primal edge of my own wolf instincts and let them take over, let them fuel me with everything they had.

We darted down the hall into the main chamber of the compound where Ewan and ten of his asshole followers were waiting for us.

"Cut the bullshit, Ewan," Tristan barked out to the opposite side of the room. "We all know who the Alpha of this pack is, and it'll never be you."

Ewan's lips curled into a sneer, his hands flexing at his sides. "They didn't seem to have much trouble turning their backs on you so quickly, now, did they?" he retorted.

"And who knows what lies you told them," Tristan growled, his voice low and

dangerous. “This ends now.”

Ewan's laughter was sharp and biting. “Power is what keeps us alive, Tristan. You've always been too soft to understand that.”

The words stung, but Tristan held his ground, the weight of leadership heavy on his shoulders.

A dozen more angry wolves spilled in from the hallway, and it was clear we weren't getting this place back without a fight.

I was claws and teeth and fury until the wolfsbane bit deep, burning me from the inside out, dragging me down.

In two seconds, we were surrounded, then trapped, then thrown into the heart of the mountain.

The fight had been a disaster, but not the slaughter Ewan's wolves wanted.

I'd seen the looks in their eyes, the grudging respect as they pulled us apart, as they half-dragged, half-carried us deeper into the compound.

I'd felt Tristan struggling to get back to me, felt him losing ground as we were pulled in separate directions, lost in the mass of bodies and snarls.

They'd bitten off more than they could chew, and they knew it.

But that didn't stop them from dragging us through their maze of tunnels, from throwing us into a cave that reeked of iron and old violence.

The cave felt like a tomb. A prison. The walls were rough, the ground cold beneath

me as I scrambled to get up, to get to Tristan.

I didn't make it far before they had him in too, his body hitting the floor with a sickening thud.

Just left us with nothing but the stones.

The stones and the awful truth that we'd failed.

My heart was clenched in a fist. I saw it in the way Tristan worked his jaw, the way he sat up and shook his head like he was trying to clear it of worse than wolfsbane. I reached for him, my hand finding his, the warmth of his touch grounding me for one fragile second.

Then it was gone again, the hope, slipping through us like water.

I couldn't catch my breath, not with the scent of the cave and our failures clogging up the air.

The restraints seared into me, a vicious reminder of how little time we had, how far we were from stopping any of it.

My skin felt like it was on fire from the wolfsbane laced ropes, but nothing burned as bad as watching Ewan drag us down this path.

He circled us with madness in his eyes, confidence and lunacy entwined in a twisted dance. "How fitting that you'll both witness my ascension," he said, smugness oozing from every word. "The rightful alpha will finally claim what Tristan was too weak to use."

Tristan glared at him, the defiance never leaving his face. It was that look that kept

me steady, that made the agony more bearable, that made me believe we still had a shot, however impossible it seemed.

The celestial stones were being arranged around us, humming with the energy of a thousand broken promises. Their power was so intense it felt like a living thing, ready to tear through the mountain and everyone in it.

Ewan moved with purpose, his followers right behind him, setting the last pieces of his betrayal into motion. My heart thudded in time with the glowing altar, every beat a taunt, a warning that we were out of options and time.

I turned to Tristan, saw the mix of determination and desperation in his eyes.

He'd known this day would come, but not like this.

Not while we were helpless. He gave me a look that said everything we didn't have the breath or the words to say.

I felt the same desperation surge in me, raw and unfiltered, the knowledge that we might lose it all, including each other.

The stones pulsed with a relentless rhythm, their light spilling across the chamber in blinding waves. Ewan began to chant, ancient words that cut into the air and set it ablaze.

I fought against the restraints, every movement agony, but I didn't care.

I had to do something. Anything. Tristan strained beside me, the bonds holding us too tight, too strong.

It felt like the whole mountain was watching, waiting for us to crumble.

The ropes seared like iron brands, but the worst pain was the silence in my father's eyes.

Ewan's voice grew louder, more insistent, the glow of the stones matching the ferocity of his ambition. He was so sure of himself, so ready to take everything and leave us with nothing. I wouldn't let him. Couldn't let him.

The air buzzed with tension and magic and the sickening feeling of defeat. Tristan and I exchanged one last look, full of raw hope and the terrible knowledge of what was coming.

The chamber trembled as the stones flared, their light blistering the walls—and in that final flash, I saw it. The end. Not just of us. Of everything.

### Chapter twelve

Tristan

I wrenched against the bindings until my skin tore, rage fueling my escape.

Serena, wild-eyed, fought to free herself from her restraints.

The altar glowed with eerie light, celestial stones flaring as Ewan and Alaric now loomed over the ritual.

The air felt alive and angry, humming with ancient energy and the acrid scent of burning herbs.

The chamber, carved deep in the mountain, trembled as I finally snapped the enchanted ropes.

I launched toward Serena, locking eyes with her as a silent promise passed between us. This ended now.

The room was something ancient, something meant for wolves and magic.

Carved stone columns, towering and cold, lined the walls with snarling wolf faces.

The moonlight cut through crystal skylights, jagged shards of silver that glinted off the floor.

It was like being inside an old god's mind.

Scents of ceremonial herbs burned sharp, mixing with the heat of bodies and sweat.

Celestial stones flickered like the eyes of dead stars, throwing pale colored lights across the altar.

I could feel it all, humming through my skin, trying to pull me under.

My muscles burned as I forced myself to fight harder.

My rage at Ewan and Alaric twisted with desperation, fueling the beast inside.

The ropes glowed hot where they cut into me, some kind of shifter magic that wouldn't fucking quit.

I focused on Serena, struggling like a wild wolf against her own bindings, her eyes a mix of fury and fear.

The air was charged with it, vibrating with ancient power and our refusal to break.

I tore at the ropes until my arms screamed, the energy in the room flaring around us like a living thing.

Alaric watched, smug and detached, like he already had what he wanted.

The stones near the altar burned brighter, lighting him and Ewan in an otherworldly halo.

They were playing with forces none of us should touch, and they thought they were winning.

Ewan's betrayal cut deepest, twisting through my rage.

My most loyal beta. My brother. I wasn't about to let him do this.

I let the pain and anger flow into my body, and finally, the bindings snapped.

I didn't stop to think. Didn't stop to breathe.

I bolted toward Serena, and we caught each other's eyes.

Her birthmark glowed bright, like it was burning through her skin.

She didn't flinch. Didn't waver. Her determination shot through me, and I felt the spark of us together, raw and defiant.

Her restraints gave way and she was by my side, and we both knew what came next.

With a furious nod, we launched ourselves into the fight.

Teeth and claws instantly bared as we transformed.

Instinct and rage. Ewan's followers came at us in a rush of bodies and snarls, but I didn't care how many of them there were.

I had one goal, one single thought. I would not fucking lose this.

Serena moved like a force of nature, her wolf form sleek and deadly.

We were back-to-back, a single entity of blood and fury.

My alpha strength collided with her speed, each of us fueling the other.

Wolves closed in, teeth bared and eyes wild, and we cut them down one by one.

Ewan's wolves. Alaric's pack. Our enemies.

Their betrayal lit a fire in me that couldn't be contained.

We should have been outnumbered. We should have been outmatched.

But it didn't matter. This was life or death.

Our lives. Their death. We tore through the first line sending them sprawling, only to meet the next wave with equal ferocity.

I lost myself in it, the rawness of muscle and power, the thrill of fighting at Serena's side.

But they kept coming. Ewan's lackeys surged forward, regrouping, pushing harder.

Even with our momentum, I could feel the pressure building, the inevitability of being overwhelmed.

A flash of teeth near my throat, and I snapped back with brutal force, sending one wolf crashing into the altar.

Serena was the same, a whirlwind of defiance, yet I saw the brief flash of uncertainty in her eyes.

I knew we couldn't hold out forever. The air was too thick with it—power, tension, betrayal.

And something else, too. A charge. A shift.

As we fought, the room seemed to close in around us, pulling tighter like a noose.

Serena and I locked eyes again, a promise that we would fight this to the end.

Her birthmark lit up once more, casting an eerie glow that matched the stones.

A third wave closed in, fierce and determined, cutting us off from the exit and hemming us in.

Ewan and Alaric's followers were relentless, their loyalty absolute, their desire for us to fail all-consuming.

We moved together, a wild blur of instinct and survival, but the walls felt too close.

The space too small. And with each breath, each movement, I could feel it creeping up on us—the possibility that we might not make it out this time.

The altar's light grew violent and blinding, alive with energy and rage.

Serena broke from my side, tearing through the chaos toward Alaric.

His voice was a distant echo, trying to shape her fate with words of control.

But she was more than his daughter. More than a cursed mark.

This was her fate to break. She was a force, untethered and wild, rejecting every part of him that held her back.

I turned to Ewan, our betrayal a living thing that breathed between us.

I barely felt the first blow. My mind was full of Serena, her raw power as she fought

her way across the chamber.

Then Ewan came at me again, fangs out and relentless.

I met his eyes and saw nothing left of the brother I knew.

His rage, his certainty, his commitment to the old ways—all of it made him savage, made him brutal.

And it left him empty. He thought he could take me down, but he didn't realize I was fighting for more than a pack's legacy.

I was fighting for her. For us. I let his next blow land, then lashed out with all the force I had.

The crack of bone echoed like a gunshot as I knocked him back, and I felt the first sting of victory.

"You've lost it," Ewan growled, circling me with his hackles raised. "You think this is about love, but it's about power. You're a fool if you think you can have both."

"Funny," I said, dodging his next strike. "I thought I could trust you."

"Your trust is weakness. Just like that girl." He lunged at me, but I was ready. I caught him by the neck, slammed him into the stone, and watched the shock cross his face as it split with the impact. He wasn't used to losing.

"It's called strength," I said, breathing hard, every muscle in my body alive with energy. "Maybe if you had any, you'd know what it looks like."

I sent him flying, felt the power in my limbs as it followed through.

But then the light caught my eyes, Serena's fight pulling my focus as she shifted back into her human form to deal with her father.

I saw her and Alaric in a tangle of emotion and defiance, the raw force of their connection spiraling into the air around them.

Alaric had no clue who he was dealing with. His voice, so full of authority, tried to cage her in. "The ritual is the only way. Your stubbornness will destroy us both." He grabbed for her arm, but she twisted away, the glow of the altar painting her face with fierce determination.

"Destroy you, maybe," Serena shot back. Her words cut like knives.

"I'm not your daughter anymore. I'm Tristan's mate.

Do you have any idea what happens if the wrong wolves use these stones for this ritual?

" Her agility made her a blur as she broke free from his grasp.

She was beautiful in her defiance, a wild and unstoppable force.

"You think you have a choice?" Alaric said, the scent of desperation thick on him. He didn't understand, not really. And that's why he would never have what he wanted.

"I know I do," she said, landing a blow that sent him reeling. She stood over him, chest heaving, heart blazing with the truth and freedom she'd been denied. Her gaze locked with mine for a heartbeat, raw and powerful. We knew this was it. We were too far gone.

The air crackled with tension, energy looping and tangling, binding us in a way that

made the whole damn room feel like it was about to collapse.

Ewan closed in again, a blur of speed and anger, but his attacks meant nothing.

Not against the heat of my blood and the sight of Serena finally breaking free.

We were locked in combat, the walls narrowing around us as power swirled through the space.

The sound of fangs, fists, of battle, of defiance—they filled the chamber, echoing with the force of everything I'd ever wanted to say.

Everything I couldn't. I let it out with a guttural howl, every word left unspoken a blow that sent Ewan staggering back.

I was stronger than him, stronger than any of them. Because Serena made me that way.

The altar flared brighter, violent and insistent. I felt it in my bones, the ritual near completion, and knew we were almost out of time. Serena's raw need to end this radiated across the room, charging the air with urgency and fire. And then I saw it in her eyes—a spark, a decision.

She looked at the altar, then down at the mark glowing on her wrist. "It was never about killing the curse," she whispered. "It was about breaking the cycle."

Before I could shout her name, she broke from her fight with Alaric. Broke away from everything, a wild determination on her face.

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:07 am*

“I’ll end it myself!” she yelled, rushing the altar, fierce and untamed, ready to take it all.

“Serena!” I cried out, desperate and useless. But she was already gone, charging toward the heart of the ritual. Toward the only thing left that could stop us.

Her pain burned through me, searing and blinding. Serena was on the altar, light flooding her body until she was nothing but agony and fire. Her scream ripped through my soul. I didn’t think. Didn’t stop until I made my way to her.

“You are my life now, Serena. My mate. My fire. Your enemies are mine, your pain is mine, your future is mine to protect. I love you—endlessly, irrevocably, beyond time itself. I choose you in this life and every life after.”

My mind was a blank rush of terror and desperation as I lunged for her, instantly shifting my form to pull her from the light and take her place. The energy was pure fire, a force of nature, too strong and too wild. I didn’t care if it killed me.

And then it hit.

The power slammed into me, a living, breathing force.

It didn’t wait, didn’t pause. It swallowed me whole.

I fell onto the altar, the energy coursing through my veins like a tidal wave, ripping through muscle and bone.

Every cell of my being exploded with light and heat and pain, until I was sure I would come apart at the seams.

The roar of it drowned everything else, and I gave myself over to it, the sheer magnitude of it too much to fight.

I was on the edge of everything, teetering between life and oblivion, and I didn't care.

Didn't care because I knew Serena was safe.

I could feel her presence even in the darkness, a beacon that held me steady while the storm ripped me to pieces.

This was the truth of it. Not power stolen, but power shared. Not domination—but sacrifice. That was the bond. That was the cure.

The power pushed me to the brink, then beyond it.

My body arched against the assault, and I was sure it would never end.

But slowly, slowly, the intensity waned.

I felt it loosening, a release of breath, a shudder of finality.

It left me hollow and full at once, the shock of it vibrating through every part of me.

The chamber pulsed with volatile magic. Cracks spiderwebbed through the stone, as if the mountain itself could no longer hold this power.

The celestial stones vibrated with energy, a violent and chaotic hum.

Then they cracked, a thousand fractures blooming across their surfaces, before shattering completely.

A flood of divine light burst out, an ethereal supernova that blazed through the chamber and sent everything flying.

In one deafening thud, bodies hit the ground.

Hard. The world reeled and tilted around us, the dust rising like smoke.

And then, there was nothing.

The light faded, leaving us in a haze of ash and silence. I blinked against it, stunned and dazed, until the world came rushing back. My body ached, my mind was a jumble, but I was alive.

Serena was there, pulling me close, her touch urgent and warm.

Her eyes, wide with fear and relief, met mine.

I could see the glow of the birthmark on her wrist, no longer a crescent moon but a full and shining moon with a star, and felt the pulse of its twin on my own skin.

The symbols matched, vibrant and alive, beating in time with each other like a shared heartbeat.

We were changed.

My chest tightened as I realized Serena never meant to survive it. The curse shattered not because I saved her—but because she chose to burn for all of us. That's what ended it. Her choice. Her fucking courage.

The mountain trembled beneath us, a slow and rumbling protest, as if aware of its power slipping away.

I could feel it, the severing of a bond that had lasted generations, giving way to something new.

We were free, the entire Stormvale pack unshackled from the land, and I didn't know what that meant. But I knew it was ours.

Serena clung to me, her strength returning, her presence as real and fierce as I'd ever known it. We held onto each other in the dust and the debris, the raw edges of the world shifting around us, knowing we had risked everything. And knowing we had won.

Ewan crawled from the rubble, eyes wide with disbelief and terror.

The transformation gutted him, ripped away everything he'd clung to.

The mountain's power. His faith in the old ways.

The idea that I was weak. I felt the shift in the room, the pack's eyes on me with a new and reverent fear.

Ewan's world had come undone, but I wouldn't leave him behind.

"It doesn't have to end this way," I said.

He couldn't speak. His mouth opened and closed like a fish on dry land, his disbelief strangling him.

I'd never seen him like this. So shaken, so hollow.

As if the very ground he stood on was crumbling beneath him.

And maybe it was. Maybe everything he thought he knew, everything he'd fought for, had turned to ash.

"It doesn't have to end this way," I said again, my voice carrying through the debris and the dust. A raw and open offer, even now.

He found his words, but they came out choked and ragged. "You...you were supposed to die." There was no rage in it, only the empty echo of a man who'd lost his god.

"But I didn't." Serena's voice, strong and defiant, joined mine. She stood by my side, a pillar of force and determination. Together, we were everything he'd feared. And more. "None of us did."

Ewan's eyes flickered, confusion bleeding into something else. Anger. Desperation. I could see the moment he refused to accept it. Refused to accept us. The mountain continued to shake, as if it too was denying the shift in power. But it wouldn't last. None of it would.

I took a step toward him, knowing I might regret it. Knowing I might not.

"Stand down, Ewan. I'm giving you the chance." The words were heavy with everything I still felt. Everything that hadn't died between us.

But he wouldn't take it. Wouldn't take anything but his own failure. "No!" His voice cracked with rage and horror, and I saw the wildness take hold. "Never!"

He lunged at me, a desperate last attack. The force of it almost sent us both sprawling, but I caught his arms and swung him around, using his momentum against him. His fury blinded him, but I saw every move. Felt every blow. He was strong, but

I was stronger. He was angry, but I was resolved.

Our bodies collided in a furious rhythm, a dance of strength and will.

Ewan gave it everything he had, but he'd already lost. Already lost when he thought I couldn't take it.

He thought wrong. My eyes locked with Serena's as she watched us, her presence lending me every ounce of power I needed.

Ewan could never know that kind of bond.

Never feel that kind of strength. Not like this.

I caught him off guard, pinned him to the floor with all my weight.

"You were my brother once," I said, my voice low and raw with regret.

I could feel his heart racing, his breath ragged under my grip.

"I won't be the one to end you." I saw him for what he was—broken by power, driven by fear.

The wolf I once called brother died the day he chose control over truth. I wouldn't follow him into that grave.

I let him up, slowly, knowing it was over. Knowing I'd given him more than he ever deserved.

Ewan staggered back, his face contorted with rage and humiliation. He looked at me like I was a ghost, a vision that should have vanished. His lips curled in a snarl, but I

could see the defeat in his eyes. The surrender. The bitter taste of losing everything.

He backed away, shoulders hunched with hatred, before disappearing into the shadows. The mountain continued to tremble, shaking loose the old and the broken, as I watched him go. As I watched it all unravel around him.

Then I felt them. The eyes of the pack. Not just on me, but on us. Serena and I, standing amidst the chaos, our birthmarks blazing and our hands intertwined. The world had changed, and so had we.

“Anyone else who stands with Ewan or Alaric has one chance to leave. Now. Or you choose to stand united with us,” I announced, reclaiming my status as Alpha.

A beat of silence passed like a pulse. Then the first wolf stepped forward. Then another. Heads bowed. Eyes wide. The old order shattered with every step they took toward us, and a new one began.

From the far side of the chamber, Alaric stumbled out of the debris, his regal composure broken and his eyes hollow. He looked at Serena—really looked at her—as if seeing her for the first time and still not understanding what he’d lost.

Serena stepped forward, her chin lifted, fire in her gaze. Her voice cut through the silence like a blade.

“I’m not your curse,” she said, loud enough for every wolf to hear. “I’m your reckoning.”

Alaric didn’t speak. He didn’t argue. He just stared at her, pale and stunned, before turning and walking away into the shadows—his legacy crumbling behind him.

I couldn’t take my eyes off her. My mate. My equal. Serena hadn’t just survived

him—she had outgrown him. Chosen her own path, her own power, and claimed it with fire and defiance. And I loved her more in that moment than I ever had.

The pack gathered, a slow and hesitant shift, but they were drawn to us.

Drawn to what we'd become. I saw Alaric, his eyes wide and hollow, as he stumbled out of the debris.

But it was my own wolves I focused on. Stormvale wolves.

Ewan's wolves. Serena's. They all sensed the new bond, the new power coursing through us, like a break from the past. It scared them, but it was real.

More real than the mountain had ever been.

Serena leaned into me, her body warm and strong against my side. Her presence surged through me like blood, like life, like victory. Together, we were everything I'd ever wanted. And more.

"It's ours now," I said, a promise and a truth, as the pack closed in around us. Acknowledging us. Revering us. Fearing us. They were our wolves, and we were their leaders. And the world they'd known—one of stones and altars and binding power—had transformed into something entirely new.

We stood together, triumphant and alive, as the dust settled and the mountain shuddered one final time.

### Chapter thirteen

Serena

In the aftermath of the chaos, I watched the Stormvale wolves with new eyes.

Maybe they watched me that way, too. From the high window where I'd retreated to breathe, I saw Tristan below, surrounded by his pack in the courtyard gathering up the broken celestial stones.

The compound seemed to throb with new energy, like a beating heart.

Pack members moved across the grounds, glancing at me.

Maybe unsure, maybe curious. Tristan stood in the center, his presence impossible to ignore, and I watched the change in him, the shift from cold dominance to something warmer.

My fingers traced the changed birthmark on my wrist, wondering if I could feel at home here.

Would their pack even accept me, or simply tolerate me out of necessity?

The courtyard was filled with the low hum of voices as Tristan addressed the pack.

The mountain energy was different now, no longer oppressive but more like a comforting touch.

It didn't hum with dominance anymore. It breathed.

Slow, quiet, alive. And I could swear it was breathing in sync with me.

I leaned against the window, feeling the faint thrum of it even from where I stood.

Pack members moved cautiously at first, but some gathered close to Tristan, hanging on his every word.

The lines on his face softened as he spoke, and I noticed the way he gestured for others to join him—something he'd never done before.

I was seeing him become the alpha he was always meant to be.

I wondered if that made me the mate I was supposed to be.

I watched how the Stormvale wolves interacted, catching snatches of conversation.

Some spoke of the energy they felt, others about the uncertainty of their future.

But no one seemed panicked or upset. They were different, just like Tristan was different.

I touched the glass of the window, trying to understand what it all meant.

My mark seemed to glow and pulse whenever I looked at Tristan.

He stood in the courtyard, powerful and unyielding but also inviting, surrounded by wolves who looked to him for guidance.

The mountain no longer held them in a grip, but it was still there, its energy flowing

through them in new ways. And through me.

A knock on the door startled me, and a young pack member stepped in hesitantly.

She was no older than fifteen, her eyes darting from me to the floor as she offered me a small wooden wolf pendant.

Her cheeks flushed when she mumbled something about acceptance and left.

The pendant was rough but thoughtful, and it rested heavy in my palm.

She didn't look old enough to shift, but she'd crossed the whole damn compound to bring this to me.

That meant something. Maybe everything. My fingers closed around the pendant like it was a lifeline.

Was this what being claimed by a pack felt like?

Not by blood. By choice. Could I really belong here?

The rhythm of the compound was slow and new, like a heartbeat I hadn't known was mine.

I clutched the pendant and felt the mountain's pulse answer back

Tristan's laughter reached me through the window, unexpected and light.

I pressed my fingers to the glass, my moon and star glowing where it touched.

Below, wolves moved among the buildings, some casting wary glances at me, others

with curiosity.

I felt like an outsider but also something more. Something hopeful.

I turned the pendant over in my hands, feeling its weight. The wolf was roughly carved but beautiful in its own way. Just like my place here. I watched the compound, the way everything seemed to move in a rhythm I was only just beginning to hear.

Tristan's voice rose again, strong and steady, and I felt the change in him like an ache. I wanted to be down there with him, but I was scared of what it would mean. I traced the birthmark on my wrist, watched it glow faintly.

The Stormvale wolves were different now, and maybe I was, too.

I closed my eyes, feeling the mountain's energy wrap around me. Was it acceptance or uncertainty? Hope or fear? I wasn't sure, but I looped the pendant around my neck and held it close, feeling its warmth. I didn't know if I belonged here. But maybe that wasn't the right question anymore. Maybe it was enough that I wanted to.

Later that night, I found myself wandering the compound, contemplating my future.

Moonlight sparkled across the blooms growing at the base of the Stormvale mountain, illuminating the courtyard with an ethereal glow.

The garden felt alive in a way I couldn't explain.

New blooms curled up from the soil like second chances.

Maybe I could do the same. Maybe I already was.

Each step crushed wild mountain herbs beneath my feet, releasing sharp scents that

blended with the night air.

I sank into a secluded corner, holding the wooden pendant like it might tell me what to do.

Silver Ridge was my past, full of ghosts and memories that still hurt.

Here was my unknown, my chance to belong.

But would they accept me? I closed my eyes, trying to drown out the noise in my head.

Every choice felt impossible. Every choice felt right.

The clutched the pendant that hung around my neck tightly. My father's voice echoed like a scar. A curse. A lost cause. Would Stormvale see me the same? I ran a finger over the wolf carving and wondered if Tristan's pack would see me that way too.

Memories of Silver Ridge haunted me. My father keeping his distance.

My former pack, treating me like a burden.

I'd tried so hard to fit in, but nothing worked.

Tristan had changed everything, or maybe it was just my hope.

I held the pendant tight, feeling the weight of decisions I didn't know how to make.

Tristan's scent wrapped around me before I even saw him. Cedar and wild rain. I kept my eyes closed, not ready to face him yet. I could feel him watching me, waiting for me to open up.

I felt him sit beside me, close enough to touch.

“You’re a million miles away,” he said, his voice gentle.

I opened my eyes and found him studying me, his face full of questions.

We sat in silence for a while, both waiting for the other to speak first. I wanted to tell him everything, but I didn’t know where to start.

He reached for my hand, and the birthmark on my wrist glowed where his fingers brushed it. “The mountain feels different, doesn’t it?” he asked, looking at me intently. I nodded, not trusting myself to speak. His touch was warm and steady, like he knew exactly what I needed.

We talked about the Stormvale compound and how the wolves were adjusting.

I could hear the worry in his voice when he spoke about the challenges they’d face, but there was excitement, too.

I realized then how much he wanted me to be part of it.

I pulled my hand away, feeling guilty for my hesitation.

“Do you regret breaking the curse?” I asked, my voice barely a whisper.

His eyes flashed, like he couldn’t believe I’d asked.

“Not for a second,” he said. “What about you?” I looked at the pendant again, feeling torn.

In Silver Ridge, I ran. From fear. From the weight of a fate I didn’t choose.

But here, I wasn't running. I was choosing. Finally.

My silence must have worried him because he leaned closer, almost desperate. "What are you going to do?"

I met his gaze and finally spoke the words I'd been too afraid to say.

"I'm staying," I said—not just for Tristan. For me. For the version of myself I wasn't afraid of anymore.

Relief flooded his face, and his eyes darkened with something else, something I felt deep inside. His hand found mine again, and the world seemed to settle around us.

Our marks pulsed in unison, a shared heartbeat.

I felt his longing, the hunger he tried to hide.

He kissed me, slow at first, then with more urgency.

His lips trailed down my neck, leaving a path of fire.

He pulled away suddenly, breathing hard.

"Are you sure?" he asked, his voice rough.

I nodded, pulling him back to me. "Then let's go," he said, taking my hand.

The quiet between us vibrated with tension as Tristan led me through the halls of the Stormvale compound. My fingers were tangled with his, our shared mark pulsing like a tether drawing us together. My heart pounded, not from fear—but from the certainty of what I'd just chosen.

Him.

He didn't let go of my hand until we reached his chamber.

The door to his room creaked open, revealing the wild and intimate space.

A fire burned low in the hearth, casting amber light across plush furs laid in front the stone fireplace.

Moonlight spilled through a skylight cut directly into the mountainside ceiling, pooling silver across the blankets on his bed.

Crystal windows refracted faint glimmers of starlight against the walls, like the faint magic that still lingered here, like it was watching us.

He shut the door behind us, the lock clicking into place. Then he turned to me, eyes molten.

I expected him to tear into me, raw and wild, but he watched me like he wanted to memorize every breath, every move. When he pulled me close, his fingers dug into my back, his other hand buried in my hair. He kissed me like a promise. I was afraid I'd unravel if I didn't hold him just as tightly.

The mountain air was thick with anticipation, every beat of my heart resonating against the rocky expanse. Tristan's voice, low and rough like the distant rumble of a coming storm, wrapped around me as he spoke.

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:07 am*

“Serena,” he murmured, his piercing blue eyes locking onto mine with an intensity that made my breath catch. “I want to claim you. I want to mark you as my mate.”

A shiver ran through me, igniting a warmth that spread from the birthmark on my wrist to every corner of my being.

With a playful smirk that belied the emotion swirling within me, I met his gaze head-on. “I’m not asking,” I whispered against his lips. “I’m telling you. I’m yours.”

This wasn’t just about desire. It was about choosing each other—against fate, against blood, against everything we were told we couldn’t be.

The heat between us was already building again.

I suddenly couldn’t remember when or how we made it to his room, but I could remember the way his body felt, how the roughness of his stubble brushed against my skin, and the unexpected softness of the fur beneath me.

My mind raced ahead, wanting to know how we would be together now.

Without the curse. Without anything but us.

I remembered the look in his eyes as he came undone the first time.

As he pushed me to the edge right along with him.

My cheeks burned, but this time, it wasn’t out of embarrassment.

His voice pulled me back, mischief sparking in his eyes. “I’m going to keep you here all night, you know that? It won’t be gentle, but I’ll make this worth it.”

“I know,” I said, feeling bold and reckless. He watched me, unblinking, and I wondered if he felt like I did. Raw. Vulnerable. Completely out of control and not caring.

“I meant what I said,” he told me, his voice catching. “You’re mine , now.” He pulled me close again, the weight of him a reminder that I wasn’t dreaming, that this was all happening. I sighed against him, not knowing where I ended, and he began.

When his hands moved down my back, I felt every inch of him come alive. Mine. Like it was the first time we touched. I needed him closer, deeper. The hunger took over as if it would never be enough.

It was hunger—raw, restrained only by the thinnest thread of control. Hands cupped my face, thumbs grazing my cheekbones, but the kiss was anything but gentle. His tongue swept into my mouth, claiming every inch.

He broke away with a growl, backing me toward the fireplace. “Take off your clothes,” he rasped.

I obeyed, peeling the fabric from my skin piece by piece under his smoldering gaze. He stripped, too, and when we were bare, his body pressed me down into the softness of the furs stretched out beneath us.

He took his time.

Hot breath skimmed over my stomach, burning a trail as it went lower, lower, until his mouth found the place between my thighs.

I gasped, arching into him, his touch like electricity beneath my skin.

He held my hips to the ground, pinning me there while his tongue teased me, slow, deliberate, until I was wild with it, wild with him.

I could feel the tension coil through me, tight and hot and ready to snap, and I didn't know how much longer I could take it.

He was relentless, ruthless, licking and swirling in merciless strokes that drove me higher, drove me to madness.

I trembled, caught on the knife's edge between wanting and needing, desperate for release, desperate for him.

“Tristan,” I moaned, and the sound of his name made him groan against me—a vibration that pulled me under, pulled me in, pulling me apart.

I shattered on his tongue, crying out, my body tightening around the pleasure he gave me. It was raw, intoxicating, and I was drowning in it, in him, my voice breaking in a ragged scream of his name.

Before I could catch my breath, his mouth was at my throat. “Mine,” he growled, and then his teeth sank into my skin. Pain bloomed sharp and bright, edged with pleasure. His mark.

He brushed his lips reverently over the spot, his tongue soothing the bite, soft and tender.

I wanted to give him everything.

I pushed Tristan back and climbed over him, straddling his hips, fingers wrapping

around the hard length of him.

His lips crashed against mine as I gripped tightly and pumped my hands.

Slowly I lowered my mouth to him, beads of precum glistening at the tip of his cock.

A low groan escaped his lips as I took in his hard length, slow and deep, my tongue tracing the vein that pulsed beneath the surface.

He tangled a hand in my hair, guiding me, faster and deeper.

But when his body stiffened in warning, he pulled away.

“Not yet,” he growled, flipping me to my back.

Cupping my ass, Tristan lifted me and carried me to the bed, laying me down gently.

The moonlight cut through the room, painting everything in silver, shadowing the curves and lines of our bodies.

He was inside me so fast, like he’d die if he wasn’t.

I wrapped myself around him, pulling him into me until I thought I’d disappear.

The plush blankets under my skin, his breath on my neck, the sharpness of need—it all made my head spin. I couldn’t hold on to anything but him.

He murmured against my skin, words I couldn’t make out. I wanted to hear them, but they melted away in a haze of gasps and moans. I felt the throb of him in every part of me, insistent and steady, and I wondered if he knew I’d never needed anything this much before.

I gasped, fingers digging into his shoulders as he drove into me. It wasn't gentle—it was feral, desperate, the culmination of everything we'd wanted. His hips slammed against mine, and I met him thrust for thrust, crying out as he picked up pace.

My voice broke when I begged him to keep going, keep pushing us further. I was wild with need. I wanted the promise he'd given me, that I'd given him. A sealing of everything we were. He took my wrists in one hand, pinning them above my head, showing me just how serious he was.

"Tristan," I moaned. I felt his lips curve into a smile against my neck. The weight of him, the strength, the heat was everything I needed. My own personal gravity. I gave in to him, let him pull me in, let him destroy me in the best possible way.

He shifted his angle, driving deeper, faster, harder, pushing me toward an edge I couldn't see. I was free-falling with him, floating, weightless and light. Every nerve ending was alight, every inch of me on fire, and I loved it. I needed more of it, and Tristan knew.

He moved one hand to my throat, just a whisper of a touch, his thumb stroking softly there. Watching me as I unraveled for him. I couldn't look away. I didn't want to. I needed him to see me come undone like this.

When his hips jerked and he came, I felt his pulse inside me.

"Serena," he groaned, and it was the sweetest sound I'd ever heard. It sent me crashing over the edge, and my vision went white.

The knot came at the last second, catching me by surprise.

It was intense and deep, like he'd claimed every last part of me.

I felt it swell and lock us together, a bond more permanent than anything I'd ever known.

It pushed us past everything I'd thought we were, sealing us, breaking us, making us whole.

When the knot took hold, I didn't flinch.

I welcomed it. The magic between us surged like a storm breaking.

It didn't just bind our bodies—it unbound everything that ever kept us apart.

The weight of him pressed me into the bed, and I held on as tightly as I could, like he'd slip away if I didn't.

I never wanted to let go. Not of him. Not of this.

We stayed tangled for what felt like forever. It was breathless and perfect, and my mind was too full to even think. I kissed his shoulder, tasted the salt of his skin. I wondered if I would ever have enough of him.

"Serena," he said again, his voice ragged and soft. I felt it more than heard it, felt it inside me, just like the knot that still tied us together.

When we could finally move again, he pulled me to his side. My head rested on his chest, the rise and fall of his breathing steady and slow. I let my fingers trace the scars there, and his hand smoothed my hair back from my face, gentle, a counterpoint to everything we'd just done.

We didn't speak at first, just lay there and listened to the night. I could feel the weight of his thoughts and his heartbeat under my cheek. He turned my face to him, brushing

his thumb over my lips.

“Do you think this will change everything?” he asked.

“I think we already did.” I smiled, feeling the truth of it.

His eyes met mine, serious now. “And if the mountain won’t let us have this? If my pack—”

“Then we fight it,” I said, my voice strong. “We fight everything and everyone if we have to.”

A soft smile broke across his face. “That’s my mate,” he whispered softly. “Mine,” he whispered again, forehead pressed to mine.

“I love you,” I whispered, the words soft against his skin. “I think I have for a while. I just didn’t let myself believe it could be real. I never believed in forever. Not until you. I love you, Tristan. I’m not running anymore.”

His hand curved around my face, reverent and steady. “Then I’ll never let you go.”

I clung to him, the bond thrumming between us like wildfire.

I was home, but the war wasn’t over. The pack still needed rebuilding. But for now, I had what I needed to fight for it. For him. For us.

The first light of dawn filtered through the open balcony doors, casting a soft glow on the rumpled sheets and our entwined limbs.

I stirred, the cool mountain air prickling my skin, and carefully extricated myself from Tristan's embrace.

He murmured something unintelligible in his sleep, reaching out as if to pull me back, but I slipped from the bed, wrapping a fur around my shoulders.

The balcony stones were cold beneath my bare feet, the air crisp and fresh.

The sun was just beginning to crest the mountains, painting the sky in hues of pink and gold.

I leaned against the railing, taking in the breathtaking vista of Stormvale.

The compound was quiet, the usual hustle and bustle of pack life not yet begun.

It felt like a private moment, a stolen glimpse of tranquility before the day took hold.

I heard the rustle of the sheets behind me, and then Tristan's warm presence was at my back, his arms wrapping around my waist. He nuzzled into my neck, his breath warm against my skin. "Morning," he rasped, his voice still thick with sleep.

I leaned into him, feeling the solidity of his body against mine.

"Morning," I replied softly. We stood there in silence, watching as the sun slowly ascended, casting longer shadows across the courtyard below.

The compound seemed peaceful from this vantage point, as if the turmoil of the past weeks had never occurred.

Tristan's hands roamed gently over my body, tracing the curve of my hips, the flat of my stomach. His touch was possessive yet tender, a stark contrast to the heated passion of the night before. I could feel the hum of our bond, a steady thrum beneath my skin, connecting us in a way that was both exhilarating and comforting. The mark on my wrist pulsed softly, echoing the beat of his heart against my back. I covered his

hands with mine, squeezing gently, feeling a sense of contentment wash over me. This was real. We were real. I had spent my whole life waiting to be chosen. But this—this was the first time I'd chosen myself.

And I chose this. Him. Us. And despite the challenges that lay ahead, I felt a sense of peace in this moment that I hadn't known in a long time.

The scent of the mountains filled my lungs—pine and crisp air, the faint hint of wildflowers that somehow managed to bloom in this rugged terrain.

It was a stark contrast to the heavier, earthier scents of Silver Ridge, but it was growing on me.

There was a wildness here that called to something deep within me, something that yearned to be free.

Tristan squeezed my hand, and the look in his eyes was as raw and certain as it had been when he first laid claim to me.

"Do you feel it?" he murmured, brushing my birthmark.

"The mountain's changed. So have I. You're the only truth I've ever needed.

I love you, Serena. And if fate tries to take you again, I'll rewrite the stars to keep you. "

I turned to him, blazing with the idea of us. Tristan's lips brushed against my ear, sending a shiver down my spine. "What do you think fate has planned for us today?" he murmured, his voice steady.

"I don't know," I said with a laugh. I took a deep breath. "But this time, we don't

follow fate. We lead it.”

The mountain had stopped roaring, but it hadn’t fallen silent. There were still echoes.  
Still work to do. But we’d face it together.

Serena

The café in town was quiet, tucked between a crumbling bookshop and an old apothecary that still smelled faintly of crushed herbs and rain.

Warm sunlight filtered through the frosted glass windows, casting honeyed shadows across the mismatched tables and chairs.

I curled my hands around the chipped ceramic mug in front of me, inhaling the scent of fresh coffee and something cinnamon-laced that made my stomach growl.

Lila dropped into the seat across from me, her blonde braid wind-tangled, cheeks flushed from the mountain chill. She tossed her coat over the back of the chair like she owned the place and stole a sip from my cup before sliding her own across the table.

“Well,” she said with a grin that had just enough bite in it, “you look like someone who’s been thoroughly ruined by a certain Alpha.”

I rolled my eyes, but the heat in my cheeks gave me away. “You promised not to lead with that.”

“Please. I promised not to interrupt if I caught you in the act. This is fair game.”

I laughed, low and real, and for the first time in longer than I could remember, it didn’t feel forced. There was no edge to the joy, no guilt or shame riding on its heels. Just warmth. Just here. Just this.

Lila leaned back, sipping her drink. “You’re different,” she said after a moment. “Good different. Lighter. Like you finally stopped carrying everyone else’s shit.”

I traced a finger along the rim of my cup, then glanced down at the pendant resting against my chest. The carved wooden wolf—rough, imperfect, honest—was still warm from where it had laid against my skin.

“Stormvale’s changing too,” I said. “It’s not just me.”

Lila nodded. “The compound actually feels... alive. Like it’s breathing.”

“It is,” I said softly. “It doesn’t belong to just the bloodlines anymore. Not to Alaric’s idea of legacy or Ewan’s thirst for control. It belongs to those of us who choose it. Who fight for it.”

Lila stirred her drink, then shot me a look over the rim of her mug. “So... are we just going to pretend your father never happened?”

I exhaled, letting my fingers toy with the wooden pendant around my neck.

“He looked at me like I was her ghost, Lila. Then left without a word the night we shattered the stones. I heard whispers he’s wandering the borderlands. Maybe searching for redemption. I don’t know. And I’m not sure I care.”

Lila raised a brow. “That’s it?”

“That’s enough.” I didn’t need revenge. I’d already won.

“So, you’re really one of them now?” Lila asked. Not teasing, not doubting—just asking.

“I think,” I said slowly, “I always was. I just didn’t know where I fit until now.”

She reached across the table and squeezed my hand. “Well, now I do have to stay. Someone’s gotta keep the future Luna from working herself to death.”

I grinned. “You just want to keep raiding Tristan’s liquor stash.”

“Obviously.”

“And besides,” she added with a sly smile, “someone’s got to keep an eye on those witches from Onyx Hollow. I’m thinking of setting up shop—maybe a little blend of charmwork and mischief.”

The laughter between us faded into something quieter, something more settled. The air carried a faint scent of mountain pine through the cracked window. This place—this life—wasn’t what I’d imagined, but maybe that was the point. Fate had given me fire and fury, but I had chosen this peace.

The courtyard shimmered under the blush of dusk as Lila and I stepped through the compound gates.

The mountain was quieter now. Not empty.

Just waiting. Listening. Lanterns flickered along the stone pathways, their soft golden light casting gentle halos over the gathering wolves.

I let the weight of the day wash over me—the quiet conversations, the scent of shared meals, the distant hum of something sacred and rebuilding.

It wasn’t the kind of power my father had chased. It was steadier. Real.

Tristan stood near the central hearth, a map spread across the stone table in front of him, a group of wolves gathered in quiet discussion.

He looked up as I approached, his expression shifting instantly—command softening into something warmer.

The way his eyes tracked me felt like gravity. Like home.

He held out a hand without breaking conversation. I took it.

The wolves looked at me differently now.

Not like a curse. Not like a threat. But something else.

Something earned. My father ruled with fear.

I'd lead with something stronger—truth. It had only been a month since we broke the curse, but it already felt like we were making progress.

I offered a quiet suggestion about patrol shifts—nothing radical—but Renna, the packs' new beta nodded, adjusting the strategy without hesitation. No one questioned it.

When the council meeting ended, Tristan pulled me aside into the open air, the last remnants of light catching in his hair like wildfire. The mountain rose behind us—unchained now, unburdened. Its heartbeat no longer ruled us. But it still hummed beneath my skin like a memory.

“Think they'll ever stop looking at us like we might burn the place down?” I asked, my voice low.

Tristan smiled, thumb brushing over my pulse. “We didn’t burn it down. We remade it.”

I leaned into him, pressing my cheek to his chest. “Feels like we’re finally breathing.”

“We are.” He paused, then pulled back just enough to meet my eyes. “You know they listen to you now. Not because of your mark. Not because of me. Because of who you are.”

He reached for my hand, folding it into his. “You became the heart of this pack, Serena. And you became the heart of me. I love you. I’ll love you until this mountain crumbles into dust.”

I didn’t reply right away. I just let it settle inside me—the truth of it, the weight, the freedom. I had once been the girl who ran from her name, her fate, her pack. Now I stood beside my mate, my Alpha, and claimed a future we built with our own hands.

“You broke down every wall I had,” I said, “and I didn’t even see it happening. I love you, Tristan. More than the fate they tried to chain us to.”

“Then we rewrite fate. Together,” he replied.

Stormvale wasn’t just his anymore.

It was ours .

The mountain pulsed beneath my feet—no longer a tether, but a promise. I looked out at our home and whispered the word aloud, just to hear it.

“Home.”

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:07 am*

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“Happy birthday!” Rory yelled.

I pulled the phone away from my ear, squinting. Did she have to be so loud? It was too early for that. I hadn't even gotten a cup of coffee in me yet.

“Thanks . . . I think,” I grumbled.

“Oh, I'm sorry, did I wake you up?” Rory asked, not sounding sorry at all. Like a menace to society—that's what she sounded like.

“Yes. Would it have been so bad to let me sleep a couple more hours?”

She laughed. “Seeing as you have your birthday dinner with your parents in about an hour, I didn't think it would be a problem.”

Wait a minute . . . dinner? In an hour?

“Rory...” I hesitated, pulling the blanket off my head. My long, dark red hair came with it, falling over my face. I hurriedly cleared it with my free hand. “What time is it?”

“It's five o'clock, chica.” She was full-on belly laughing this time. “You slept all day.”

I sat up and looked at the clock on my desk. Yep, there it was, in glowing purple numbers. Shit.

“Hey, come open your front door,” she said. “I brought you coffee.”

“You are a goddess and I take back every evil thing I ever thought about you.”

I sprang out of bed. I was only wearing an oversized T-shirt, but I didn’t care. I ran through my tiny apartment and threw open the front door. Rory stood on the other side, holding a tray of Starbucks drinks and grinning from ear to ear, her large hoop earrings shaking in the breeze.

“I appreciate that.” She ended the call and walked past me to put the tray on the kitchen counter. “Now I get to tell you about the other part of your gift.”

“What other part?” I yawned and sank into a kitchen chair, scratching at my scalp. I needed to brush my hair, quickly, before it ate something.

“We’re on the list at Club Spice tonight,” she said, as if it were nothing.

I gaped at her, all yawns banished. This was even better than the coffee.

Club Spice was the new place in Boston on the harbor.

It was for the elite of the elite, and it was practically impossible to get in without knowing someone.

I wasn’t much of a partier—no matter what my wake-up time today might suggest—but that place looked amazing.

I’d been drooling over the pictures on their website for weeks.

“How?” I nearly screeched at her. “And way to bury the lede!”

Rory took a sip from one of the cups and leaned against the counter.

“My cousin is deejaying there tonight. We have to help him set up or carry an amp or two, but whatever. Small price to pay for getting in that place. And for free .”

Rory danced in place, swaying her hips from side to side. I would have been doing the same thing if I hadn’t just woken up.

“Wow, that’s... amazing.” I continued to stare at her in shock. “That has to be the best birthday present ever.”

“Exactly, which is why you need to go have dinner with your family, then hightail it back here so we can go dancing.”

I jumped up and headed to my room to get dressed.

I pulled my hair up into a ponytail and threw on a pair of jeans, a shimmery silver bandana shirt, and a pair of sneakers.

With the addition of a pair of diamond studs, a simple necklace to match, and a cozy chunky sweater to avoid any awkward conversations with my parents, I was ready for both events.

I grabbed a pair of heels to change into later and gave myself a mental high-five.

Back in the living room, Rory was eating a bag of chips and watching a Grey’s Anatomy rerun.

“I take it you’ll be here when I get back?” I asked, heading toward the door.

She nodded. “Yeah, my roommate has a guy over.”

She waved her hand in the air at me, eyes still glued to the TV, as I went out.

It was only about a forty-five-minute drive from the city to my parents’ home in the mountains.

The stone manor I’d grown up in loomed over me as I pulled into the half-circle driveway.

The house was huge, and for good reason: it needed to house the entire wolf pack in a crisis, if necessary.

Beyond the large windows lay an immaculately kept interior; my mother had fallen headfirst into interior decorating and could give Martha Stewart a run for her money.

I headed for the dining room. Technically, I was about ten minutes late, so I imagined my parents were already sitting down to a wonderfully presented meal.

I was neither wrong nor disappointed. My mother sat at one end of the table with a glass of red wine.

At the other end sat my father, with an empty whiskey glass in front of him.

In the center of the table was a tray of chicken, bacon, and avocado flatbread pizzas drizzled with ranch dressing.

My stomach growled at the sight; I hadn’t eaten in more than twelve hours.

I walked up behind Mom and kissed her cheek. She gave me an air kiss and patted the side of my head.

“Sorry I’m late, I... lost track of time.”

“We will forgive you this once”—my dad smirked—“seeing as it’s your birthday.”

I smiled at him, and he motioned for us to eat.

The dinner conversation was casual and informative as usual.

Mom talked about the interior design clients she’d had that week, projects she’d enjoyed.

Dad talked about an investigation for his department that had unfortunately led to a dead end, even with his wolf senses.

We talked about how everyone in the pack was doing.

Two members were due to give birth around the same time, and one of the younger men had voiced interest in challenging my father for his alpha position, which made me laugh.

The pack wanted to throw me a birthday party. Seeing as I had finals coming up in a week, they decided to wait until after the semester was over to celebrate, which I could appreciate.

After dinner, my parents sang “Happy Birthday” to me as Mom brought out a two-tier chocolate cake with vanilla frosting. I blew out the candles, excited to eat my piece of cake and meet Rory to hit the club. I could practically feel the club music vibrating on my skin when I took my first bite.

My father cleared his throat. I licked the frosting off my fork and looked at him. He held out a square, velvet-covered box.

“Olivia, this is for you. It has been in our family for generations.”

I opened it. It was a necklace: a silver wolf paw pendant set with a moonstone crescent and strung on a silver chain. The stone shone as if it were backlit. I touched it, tracing the shape with my fingers. I recognized it from the old pictures in my mother’s boudoir.

“This was your grandmother’s,” I said.

Mom nodded. “The Salem witches never forgot how we put our lives at risk to help them escape the trials. They infused the stone with their magic and gifted it to the Grayson pack. It’s supposed to give visions, but all it ever gave me was a headache. We were hoping you might have better luck.”

“Visions,” I repeated, looking down at the necklace. “Like... seeing the future?”

“Sometimes,” Dad said. “Sometimes it shows the past, or the answer your soul is searching for. Witch magic is... unpredictable when not controlled by a witch.”

“That’s intense,” I said.

My curiosity got the better of me; I unclasped the chain and put it on.

For a moment the cool metal hung heavy around my neck, and nothing happened.

Then I was no longer sitting at my parents’ dinner table but standing at an altar, wearing a white dress. Across from me was a man with dark brown hair, dressed in a suit, his face obscured. A priest stood between us.

“Do you take Olivia Jessica Grayson as your lawfully wedded wife?” the priest asked.

The man across from me nodded. “I do.”

The world around me tilted and I fell to the floor, my hands spread wide on plush, white carpet. I looked up to see another man I had never seen before, with dark brown hair and blue eyes. He had a strong jaw, and there was something about him that made my heart race.

The image slipped away and then I was looking at Rory—smiling back at me as we danced at Club Spice.

The church came back in a flash, and now a woman stood between me and the man who had said I do . She was saying something I couldn’t quite make out, as if someone had muted the scene.

A few more images crossed before me, but I couldn’t make sense of them. There was a baby boy with bright blue eyes, a close-up of a pen in my hand, and two wolves snarling at each other.

Then I was sitting in my seat again: Mom on my left, Dad on my right. They were watching me, patiently waiting for me to steady myself. My mother looked apologetic, but my father’s face lit up with joy and—if I wasn’t mistaken—pride. He grinned and reached over to pat me on the back.

“You handled that really well!”

I was busy regaining my breath, having apparently tried to hold it through the whole thing. In the future, I’d have to make sure to breathe.

“It’ll become easier in time,” Mom said, “so long as you continue to wear the necklace. It has to learn you – your soul, your path – for everything to make sense. It needs to tune into your wavelength or something along those lines.”

“So don’t take it off or I’ll have to go through all that again?”

My mother nodded.

“Duly noted.” I stood. “Well, thank you for the gift. I greatly appreciate everything. I have another birthday celebration to get to so I—”

“We have one more thing to talk to you about,” Dad said. He didn’t look happy.

“That sounds... ominous,” I said, sitting back down.

“Well... it’s about the pack and what we need from you in order to secure its safety.”

Okay, that really didn’t sound good. I looked from him to my mother, who looked even less happy.

“What’s going on, Daddy?”

“You know we have been having border issues in the north,” he said, “with the Ironborn pack.”

I nodded. The Ironborn territory bordered ours to the north, at the New Hampshire-Massachusetts state line.

Because our territory is so big, they think they can move onto Grayson land without us knowing.

Our packs fight over it constantly. Two years ago, a Grayson pack member died during one of those battles.

“Well, we’ve finally found a solution,” he continued. “If we can merge our packs, there will be no reason to fight any longer. So we’ve arranged for you to marry the

Ironborn alpha's son."

I gaped at him, seriously hoping I had misheard him. Marriage? To a stranger?

"I'm sorry, what? You've . . . arranged my marriage?"

"Yes, honey. I'm sorry, but it was the best solution. Just think of the opportunities we'll have with more wolves on board. And you'll be the alpha female. Your mother and I have been training you for this your whole life."

There was a loud buzzing in my head like a hive of angry bees had taken up residence between my ears.

Marriage? It was my twenty-first birthday, for crying out loud.

I was too young to get married, especially to a man I'd never met.

I shook my head and stood, using the table to steady myself.

My parents looked at me with concern in their eyes. I stared at my cake plate.

"I have to go," I said. "I gotta... thank you for dinner and the gift and... for letting me know what's going to happen, I guess. I—I'll call you."

I headed for the door. My parents called after me, but I kept walking. I couldn't hear what they were saying anyway; the buzzing had gotten louder.