



Fated Wolf's Redemption (Cascade Wolf Chronicles #2)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: He's the enemy I can't resist. I'm the chaos he can't control.

I'm Sophia McKenna, Windrider by blood, wild by choice. We don't settle. We don't belong. And we sure as hell don't fall for possessive, snarky wolves with golden eyes and infuriating growls. But Lucas Stone is a problem I can't outrun. One kiss, and I knew our bond isn't just fate. It's fire.

He says I'm a disruption. I say he's in my way. We're standing on opposite sides of a looming war. The Crimson Claw is mutating. Wolves are vanishing. And the land itself is crying out for help.

We have no choice but to work together. The longer we fight the pull between us, the hotter it burns. And when we finally give in? The mountain might not survive the fallout.

I didn't come here to fall in love. I came to stop whatever's poisoning the land.

But Lucas makes it hard to remember where the mission ends... and where we begin.

Fated Wolf's Redemption is the second scorching, standalone romance in the Cascade Wolf Chronicles, where fate binds, tempers clash, and love is as wild as the wolves who claim it.

Total Pages (Source): 22

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:15 am

PROLOGUE

SOPHIA

The wind carries the scent of damp earth and pine as we descend into the valley, our paws pressing into the rain-softened ground. Mist clings to the air, swirling between towering evergreens, thick enough to veil the path ahead. I keep moving, ears alert, muscles coiled, listening for the sounds of my pack. We travel silently, wolves blending into the twilight, paws gliding over rock and moss with the ease of those who have never known the meaning of settled land.

This migration is different—I can feel it in my bones, an ache not of exhaustion but of change. We've roamed the wild places of the mountain ranges along the Pacific Coast for generations, following the seasons, never calling one stretch of land home. The Windrider Pack belongs to no territory, bows to no alpha beyond our own. We are the storm on the horizon, a force moving where the land calls us, unchained.

But something has been calling us here.

We move as one, a line of wolves threading through the dense undergrowth. Our leader, my father, keeps a steady pace at the front, his silver fur catching the last streaks of fading sunlight. He has always trusted the whispers of the land, reading its unspoken messages in the way the wind shifts or how the rivers carve their paths. And for the first time in my life, he has broken from our traditions.

We should have left the Cascades by now.

We don't stay anywhere long. The Windrider Pack doesn't linger in another's domain unless forced to do so. And yet, something has anchored us here, something he refuses to explain.

I push forward, slipping through the trees until I reach his side. He doesn't slow his pace, but his ears flick toward me in acknowledgment.

"We should move on," I say through the Windwoven, the unique bond that flows through our pack, woven by the winds, unbreakable and ever-flowing, our connection humming like the wind through the peaks.

"Not yet." His response is firm, final.

"Why?"

He doesn't answer, but I see it in his eyes when he finally glances at me. The tension pulling at his shoulders, the way his gaze flickers toward the towering ridges in the distance, the way his paws slow as if waiting for something unseen to reveal itself.

My father is afraid. I don't remember a time when I've ever thought of him that way. He is the kind of leader who has never known uncertainty, never let doubt take root. For him, the world has always consisted of open roads and endless sky.

But here, in the Cascades, something is different—a distant rumble rolls across the peaks. Thunder, low and guttural, vibrates through the trees. A storm is building.

We reach a break in the forest where the land opens to a sweeping cliff side, overlooking the valley below. The wind rushes past, curling through my fur, carrying with it the scent of distant wolves. Not Windriders.

Pack wolves. Settlers. Bound to one place, tied to their borders like roots that refuse

to give way to the storm.

My father exhales, a slow, heavy sound, before his form dissolves in a crackling swirl of lightning-threaded mist. The air hums, thick with the energy of his shift, before the mist peels away, leaving him standing in human form—barefoot, naked, wild-haired, a warrior carved from the untamed world itself.

I follow. The shift wraps around me, swallowing my form in a haze of storm-lit color, and when it clears, I rise on two feet, the cool night air brushing my bare skin. I kneel to where I dropped my duffel bag, tossing him his clothes, while I pull on a loose sweater, leggings and warm boots before stepping beside him.

My father stares at the valley, his face unreadable.

"Tell me why we're still here." My voice is quiet, barely above the wind.

For a long moment, he doesn't respond. Then, he lifts his gaze to the stars beginning to emerge through the dissipating mist.

"Something is broken."

The words send a ripple of unease through me.

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"We hear the land's call differently now," he answers looking to the horizon. "Something beneath the surface has been broken. I don't know if anyone can mend it."

The weight of his words settles in my chest. The Windrider Pack has always had a connection to the land, something deeper than simple instinct. We can feel the rhythm

of the wild, the heartbeat of untouched places. We sense when an imbalance is near. But this is the first time my father has admitted that something might be beyond repair.

I cross my arms, watching as the trees below sway in the rising wind. "And you think we're meant to fix it?"

He doesn't answer right away. Instead, his gaze shifts toward the west, where the outlines of the settled packs' territories stretch in unseen lines across the land.

"I think we're meant to find the ones who can."

A howl rises from the distance. Not one of ours—wolves from the Nightshade Pack. I tense instinctively, my body coiled, my senses stretching beyond the reach of sight. My father lays a steady hand on my shoulder, his grip firm.

"There's more to this place than we know." His voice is quiet, filled with something I don't understand. "And more to the wolves who rule it."

I don't respond. The Nightshade Pack is one of the oldest in the region. Powerful, territorial, deeply rooted in tradition. Unlike the Windriders, they belong to this land. Their history is etched in the soil and the peaks that rise above it, but that doesn't mean they will welcome us.

Another howl echoes through the night, closer this time. My wolf stirs beneath my skin, sensing something in the air, something just beyond reach.

My father takes a slow breath. "This is where we stay, for now."

I say nothing, but my pulse thrums in my throat. Our kind don't settle. We don't belong to any one place. We follow the wind, and we move on.

Not this time. Not here.

Something waits in these mountains. Something we are meant to find. And for the first time, I wonder if it is not the land itself calling to us—but someone within it.

LUCAS

The air is sharp with the tang of pine and frost as I lean against the trunk of an ancient cedar, staring out over the misty valley below. The moon hangs low in the sky, heavy and full, its light casting silver across the treetops. Somewhere in the distance, a mournful howl splits the quiet. It's not one of ours. Crimson Claw, maybe, or perhaps something worse.

A crushing weight settles in my chest. My fists clench so tightly that my nails leave a stinging imprint. Ryder and Bella are settling into their roles as a bonded pair, their connection bringing hope back to the Nightshade Pack. And yet, here I am, standing at the edges of our territory, the shadows creeping closer every damn night.

The sound of soft footsteps pulls me from my thoughts. I don't turn, but my senses sharpen, my wolf stirring restlessly. It's one of the younger scouts, his scent fresh and nervous.

"Lucas," he says, his voice barely above a whisper. "We've got movement near the north ridge."

I nod, straightening, my jaw tightening. "How many?"

"Two, maybe three," he says. "But they're not Crimson Claw. At least... they don't smell like it."

His hesitation sends a flicker of unease through me. "Then what do they smell like?"

“Strangers,” he says, his voice trembling slightly. “Like they don’t belong.”

I curse under my breath, running a hand through my hair. Strangers. That’s the last thing we need right now. With the birthrate crisis still looming and tensions between the packs in the Rainshadow Region fragile at best, new players in our territory could mean anything—none of it good.

“Where’s Ryder?” I ask, my tone sharper than I intend.

“Still at the lodge. He and Bella...”

“Got it,” I cut him off, not needing to hear the rest. Ryder deserves his moment of peace, especially after everything he and Bella went through to get here. But peace is a luxury we can’t afford right now.

“Stay here,” I tell him, already moving. “If they get closer, signal the others. I’ll check it out.”

“Lucas...” he starts, but I’m already gone, slipping into the shadows of the forest.

The north ridge is quiet when I arrive. Too quiet. There’s a distinct buzzing in my head and I lean against a tree, trying to get my bearings. Something has sent my internal senses into a tailspin. I slow my pace, my wolf on edge as I scan the area.

Then I see them.

Three figures stand at the edge of the ridge, silhouetted against the moonlight. They’re too far to make out their features, but their posture—upright and alert—and their scent tells me one thing.

They’re shifters.

“Who the hell are you?” I mutter under my breath, stepping closer but careful to stay in the cover of the trees.

One of them turns, her gaze sweeping the forest as if she can feel me watching. The buzzing in my head intensifies and is disorienting. My wolf bristles, a growl threatening to rise in my throat, but I swallow it down. I crouch lower, letting the shadows cloak me.

“We don’t have time for this,” the tallest of the figures says, his voice carrying easily in the chilly night air. The voice is deep and commanding, with an edge of irritation. “If the Nightshade wolves find us in their territory...”

“They already have,” I say, stepping out of the shadows before I can think better of it.

The figures whirl toward me, their movements sharp and precise. Not Crimson Claw, but shifters. I can feel it in the way their energy hums against mine, their presence setting my instincts on high alert, especially the female.

The woman steps forward, signaling the other two to leave her and return to wherever the hell they came from. “You must be Lucas.”

Her words hit me like a blow, my wolf snarling at the familiarity in her tone. “And you are?”

“Just passing through,” she says, though the way she holds herself suggests otherwise. “We mean you no harm.”

I take a step closer, my muscles tensed, ready for a fight. “If you meant us no harm, you wouldn’t be creeping around in our territory without an invitation. Start talking, or I’ll...”

“Relax,” she soothes, holding up her hands in mock surrender. “We’ll just move on. We were only searching for answers. We thought we might be able to help.”

“Help?” I snort. “You don’t belong here. This is Nightshade territory.”

“Exactly,” she says, a sly smile creeping across her face. “And if you want to save it, you may find you need our help more than you’d like.”

My blood runs cold at her words, my wolf snarling louder in the back of my mind. “Save it from what?”

The woman’s smile fades, and for the first time, I see a flicker of something in her eyes—fear. She turns away and calls back over her shoulder, “From what’s coming.”

The weight of her words settles over me, heavier than the silence that follows as she walks away. My heart pounds, my wolf restless as I stare after her, the sense of foreboding tightening like a noose around my neck.

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CHAPTER 1

SOPHIA

The fire burns low, casting flickering light over the damp earth. The scent of pine and wet bark lingers in the air, mixing with the remnants of the stew Oscar made earlier. We've settled in for the night, but the energy in the camp is anything but restful.

Kylie leans against a moss-covered log, idly sharpening her blade. Oscar stands near the fire, arms crossed, watching me the way he does when he expects me to say something reckless.

"Well?" he finally asks, his voice even. "Did Nightshade's beta try to rip your throat out?"

I sip from my tin mug, the tea still hot enough to warm my hands. "No," I say, tilting my head. "He just glared at me like he was deciding whether to throw me off the ridge or let me keep talking."

Kylie grins. "And which did he choose?"

I shrug. "Jury's still out."

Oscar scrubs a hand down his face. "Sophia, this isn't a game. If we don't get these wolves to listen, none of us will have a future to fight for."

"I know that," I snap, setting my mug down a little harder than necessary. "But you know as well as I do that the settled packs don't think like we do. They don't trust outsiders, and they sure as hell don't change their traditions just because someone tells them to."

Oscar exhales sharply, turning his gaze toward the darkness beyond the firelight. "Then we make them listen. Find a way."

Kylie snorts. "Easier said than done. You saw those wolves tonight. They're locked in their ways, and Lucas Stone might be the worst of them."

The name alone sends a prickle of awareness across my skin. Lucas.

Golden eyes like wildfire, broad shoulders rigid with authority, a voice rough and edged with command. 'You don't belong here,' he'd said it like it was absolute fact, as if the Windriders were nothing more than wanderers passing through his carefully protected world.

I roll my shoulders back, irritation crawling up my spine. "He's stubborn," I admit. "But he's not an idiot. He knows something's wrong. I saw it in his face when I mentioned the birthrate decline."

Oscar frowns, his brow furrowing. "So he's aware?"

"He suspects. They all do. They just won't admit it because it means facing the fact that the old ways aren't working anymore." I glance toward the edge of camp, where the forest presses in like silent sentries. "But this isn't just a problem for them. It's everywhere. Packs are losing something fundamental, and no one can figure out why."

Kylie flips her knife in her palm, watching the firelight catch along the sharp edge.

"You really think it's tied to the land?"

I nod. "I do. There's something fractured beneath us. The energy in these mountains—it's different. Wilder. More unpredictable."

Oscar rubs a hand over his jaw. "And you think the Nightshade Pack is the key?"

"They're the oldest settled pack in the region," I say. "If anyone holds the missing piece, it's them. But we won't get anywhere if they keep guarding their damn borders like they can keep the truth out just by growling at it."

Kylie laughs. "To be fair, Lucas does growl pretty well."

I groan, throwing a twig at her, which she bats away effortlessly. "Not helping."

Oscar watches me for a long moment, his gaze unreadable. "You know he's going to fight you every step of the way, right?"

I lift my chin. "Then I'll fight back."

Kylie nudges Oscar with her boot. "Told you. She's already got him under her skin."

"Absolutely not," I blurt out quickly.

Oscar arches an eyebrow, unimpressed. "Sophia, don't play games with this. If Lucas Stone is going to be a problem, we need to deal with him accordingly."

"He's not a problem," I say, standing. "He's just another wolf too set in his ways to see what's happening right in front of him. And I don't have time to waste convincing a man like that to pull his head out of his own ass."

Oscar makes a sound that might be amusement or exasperation—hard to tell with him. "Then what's your plan?"

I stretch my arms over my head, rolling my shoulders. "We give them something they can't ignore."

Kylie watches me, eyes glinting with curiosity. "And what exactly would that be?"

I smile, slow and deliberate. "Proof. Something undeniable. Something that they can't turn a blind eye to. They may admit that there's a problem, but they refuse to try and do something about it."

Oscar doesn't argue, which tells me he agrees. "And if they still refuse?"

"Then we keep pushing," I say simply. "Because we don't have the luxury of waiting for them to decide if our warnings are worth listening to."

Kylie tosses her knife into the dirt beside the fire, the blade sinking into the earth with a satisfying thud. "I thought your father said diplomacy was the goal."

I grab my mug, draining the last of my tea. "Diplomacy is the goal. But if that doesn't work..." I shrug, heading toward my tent. "I'm not above breaking a few rules... not to mention skulls."

Oscar shakes his head. "Lucas is going to love you."

I snort, throwing him a look over my shoulder. "I doubt it."

Kylie grins. "Even better."

I rinse my mug, my mind still replaying the moment I faced Lucas down in the forest.

The way he stood there, solid as the mountain itself, daring me to challenge his authority.

Good—I never back down from a challenge.

The fire is little more than glowing embers when my father strides into camp, his coat damp from the rain that started falling an hour ago. He's followed by Blackwood. The moment they step into the clearing, the energy shifts. Oscar straightens from where he's crouched by the fire, and Kylie stops playing with her blade, her sharp gaze settling on the man walking beside him.

Elder Marcus Blackwood, member of the Regional Council. The elder moves with the kind of purpose that comes from knowing he's the most important person in camp—or at least believing it. He ties his long silver hair back at the nape of his neck, and though his steps are slow, they carry the weight of authority. He wears it like a cloak, like it should be enough to command respect without question.

I resist the urge to sigh. Oh, goodie... this should be fun.

My father nods at me. "Sophia, you already know Elder Blackwood."

"Elder," I say smoothly, lifting my chin. "It's been a while."

His expression doesn't change, but something about the way he studies me makes it clear he hasn't forgotten who I am—or the last time I ignored his advice.

"Too soon, perhaps," he murmurs.

Kylie hides a snort behind her hand, and Oscar shoots me a warning look that I promptly ignore. I motion toward the fire. "You're welcome to sit."

Elder Blackwood doesn't move. "No need. This won't take long."

Of course, it won't. He—and the others on the council—don't like us. We don't answer to them, and we ignore the orders, threats and warnings.

My father glances at me before addressing the elder. "We came to the Cascades because something isn't right. We're not the only ones who feel it. You know as well as I do that the birthrate crisis is worsening, and yet, the Regional Council does nothing."

"The council does plenty," Blackwood says, voice clipped. "And you, as outsiders, have no right to interfere."

I fold my arms. "Outsiders? I didn't realize acknowledging reality made us outsiders."

The elder's gaze sharpens. "Reality is something you know very little about, girl."

I grit my teeth, swallowing down the urge to say something that would make my father regret bringing me into this world.

Oscar clears his throat. "What we know is that packs all across the region are seeing birthrates drop. This isn't just one pack's problem. It's all of ours."

Elder Blackwood lets out a slow breath, as if Oscar's logic is exhausting to him. "The decline is concerning, but not something we can change by abandoning tradition. Packs have survived worse."

I stare at him, incredulous. "Worse? How exactly do you think packs are going to survive when children aren't being born? Hope that the problem fixes itself? Wait until we dwindle down, one by one?"

The elder's expression remains impassive. "We will endure."

I glance at my father, but he's watching the elder carefully, his face unreadable.

"That is not the region's only problem," Blackwood continues. "The Crimson Claw is making things more difficult."

The crackling of the fire is the only sound. Kylie leans forward, her tone lighter than the rest of us. "Oh? What are they up to now? Raiding food supplies? Picking fights over territory they don't actually own?"

Blackwood's mouth tightens. "They're not just stirring trouble. There seems to be something deeper at work."

I frown. "Something deeper?"

He hesitates, as if weighing whether or not we deserve an answer. "They aren't natural. They don't shift like we do. They seem stuck in some kind of feral shift. They are, to put it bluntly, monstrous."

Silence. I feel a kind of hum between my pack mates, a pulse of shared unease.

Oscar's voice is careful. "They don't shift?"

"I can't explain it," Blackwood corrects.

"Try," I say.

"They aren't like us anymore. They are bigger, faster. There's been a suggestion that there's been some kind of manipulated mutation."

I don't like the way he says it, like the words themselves don't sit right in his mouth. "Manipulated?"

He finally moves, stepping closer to the fire as he nods, warming his hands. "It's unnatural."

A slow chill runs through me. I exchange a glance with my father, but his expression remains unreadable.

"What do you think is causing it—this mutation?" I ask.

Blackwood watches me long enough that I think he won't answer. But then his voice drops lower. "Magic. Science. Who knows? All we know is that it is something dark and unchecked."

I snort. "Oh, that's just dandy. Who can resist a good curse with a morning hunt?"

Oscar shakes his head. "If the Crimson Claw are mutants—that's a threat to everyone."

"Exactly." Elder Blackwood straightens, his tone regaining its usual authority. "Which is why we don't have time for Windrider interference. The council has this under control."

I let out a short laugh. "That's funny. I don't recall seeing the council doing much of anything about it."

His eyes narrow. "Watch yourself, girl."

My wolf growls, low in my chest, but I force her back. "You don't get to ignore a crisis just because it doesn't fit inside your precious traditions, Blackwood. We aren't

here to make trouble. We're here because the world is changing, and if you keep pretending it's not happening, you're going to find yourselves completely unprepared when the storm finally hits. And if it gets past the wolves in this region, it could wipe out our kind."

Blackwood's gaze locks on mine, but I don't look away. I won't.

After a moment, he shakes his head. "Windriders. Always chasing the wind, you think you have the answers to problems you don't understand." He turns back to my father. "Keep your people in line. Stay out of Nightshade business. And don't cross the wrong borders."

He doesn't wait for a response before disappearing into the trees. Past bitterness weighs down the silence he leaves behind.

Kylie lets out a long breath. "That went well."

Oscar rubs a hand over his jaw. "So now what? If the Nightshade Pack, including Lucas and Ryder, are going to be a problem..."

I stand, brushing dirt from my pants. "We'll deal with them." I lift my chin, my pulse beating with certainty. "Now, we figure out what's really happening with the Crimson Claw. Because if the council won't do their damn jobs, then I guess we'll just have to do it for them."

Oscar mutters something about me getting us all killed, but he doesn't argue. Kylie grins, already excited about the trouble we're going to cause. And my father? He watches me carefully, nodding once.

It seems we're settled. The Nightshade wolves aren't the only threat out here, and something tells me Lucas Stone and I are about to collide a lot sooner than either of

us expected.

Oscar's voice is still ringing in my ears as I make my way toward the edge of the camp, needing space to think. If Lucas Stone is going to be a problem, we need to deal with him accordingly.

The wind moves through the trees in restless gusts, tugging at my loose braid as I step beyond the circle of firelight. The elder's words replay in my mind, each one a reminder that the council doesn't see us as allies. They see us as a problem to be dismissed.

The Crimson Claw are mutants? The land has fractured beneath us? The council is refusing to acknowledge how deep this runs? And now Lucas Stone, a man who looks like he was hewn from the mountains, will be standing in my way at every turn?

Perfect. Just perfect. I hear him before I see him. A change in the night, not unnatural, but deliberate. The sound of boots treading over damp earth. Controlled, unhurried, like a predator that knows exactly where his prey is going to run.

I don't turn, don't let on that I've already marked his approach. Instead, I keep walking, my hands loose at my sides, ready for whatever game he thinks we're playing.

"Your people need to learn better hiding spots."

The voice comes from the darkness to my left, deep and edged with that same unwavering authority I remember from our first meeting. I finally stop, shaking out my shoulders before slowly turning toward him.

Lucas leans nonchalantly against the trunk of a cedar—a combination of rigid

strength and effortless dominance, watching me like I'm the problem he hasn't figured out how to solve yet.

"Wasn't hiding," I say smoothly. "Just needed a break from your elder's condescending attitude."

His jaw tightens, but there's a flicker of something in his eyes. Amusement? Maybe. "Marcus doesn't take kindly to people questioning him."

"Neither do I," I say, tilting my head.

He doesn't move, but the air between us changes, stretching tight, as if we're standing too close despite the space still lingering between us.

"I don't trust you or any of the Windriders," Lucas states. His tone is calm, but there's no mistaking the challenge woven into his words.

"That's mutual," I say, arching my eyebrow. "I don't trust wolves who think 'territory' means 'blind loyalty to outdated rules' either."

His lips press together, but something flashes in his eyes—not anger, not quite. It's more like interest, reluctant though it may be.

"I need to know why you're really here," he says after a moment.

I fold my arms. "I already told you. We're investigating the birthrate crisis. It's affecting all packs, whether or not you want to admit it."

Lucas steps forward, closing some of the space between us. He's bigger up close, more intense, his eyes cutting through the shadows like a predator assessing his prey.

"You don't belong in the Cascades," he says.

I let out a short laugh, shaking my head. "That's the thing about my people, Lucas. We belong wherever the wind takes us... thus the name 'Windriders.'"

His gaze drops briefly to my mouth before snapping back up. The flicker of awareness is so quick I might have imagined it.

"Your father thinks there's something wrong with the land," he says, ignoring my previous statement. "You agree?"

I narrow my eyes. "You already know the answer to that. Otherwise, we wouldn't be having this conversation."

He doesn't deny it. "If it's true, if there's something unnatural happening here, I need proof."

I scoff. "Your pack wouldn't know what to do with proof if it slapped you in the face."

Lucas moves fast, stepping in close, forcing me to tilt my chin up to hold his gaze. My pulse jumps, but I don't back away.

"Watch it, Windrider," he murmurs, low and warning.

I hold his stare, refusing to let his dominance press me down. "Or what? You'll chase me off like the stray or misfit you believe all of us to be?"

Something flickers in his expression, something unreadable. Then, he does the last thing I expect.

He chuckles. It's low, rough, and entirely too appealing, the sound rolling through the space between us like distant thunder.

"You'd be a hell of a lot easier to deal with if you weren't so damn aggravating," he says.

I grin, stepping back just enough to put a breath of space between us. "I could say the same about you, Stone."

Lucas watches me for a long moment, as if debating whether to keep arguing or let me go. Then his gaze flicks to the dark tree line.

"You and your pack need to be careful," he finally says. "The Crimson Claw is a danger to us all. I've seen them, fought with them, and we believe they're getting stronger and smarter. If we don't stop them here, they won't just be a threat to us. They'll be a threat to everyone."

I study him, sensing the change in his posture, the subtle way he's offering something unspoken.

An uneasy truce, maybe. Or just reluctant curiosity—either way, it's something.

I nod slowly. "We can handle ourselves. But if we find anything worth sharing, I'll consider throwing you a bone."

Lucas shakes his head, that quiet amusement still lingering beneath the surface. "Keep pushing, Sophia. See where it gets you."

"What, you afraid I'll actually get somewhere?" I taunt.

He doesn't answer, just studies me for another beat before turning and disappearing

into the darkness, leaving nothing but the lingering scent of pine and rain.

I watch him go, my heartbeat annoyingly out of rhythm. Lucas Stone is trouble, and I really, really like trouble.

CHAPTER 2

LUCAS

The wind carries the last traces of Sophia's scent long after she's disappeared into the night, something wild and infuriatingly enticing. I shouldn't still be thinking about her, shouldn't be standing at the edge of the trees, my hands curled into fists, my pulse not quite steady.

This is a problem.

I've been around plenty of defiant she-wolves, plenty of strong-willed females who thought challenging authority made them untouchable. Sophia McKenna isn't just challenging me—she's daring me to push back.

And damn if I don't want to.

I roll my shoulders, trying to shake the way she looked at me, chin tipped up, all stubborn defiance. The way her scent lingered when she walked past, as if she knew exactly how to bury herself under my skin without even trying.

This isn't about her. The Windriders are a disruption we don't need. Sophia is a complication I can't afford, but I don't walk back toward the lodge. Instead, I follow her.

Her tracks are fresh, cutting through the damp forest floor, deliberate but not hurried. She's moving with purpose, as if she knows exactly where she's going. I keep to the

shadows, staying downwind, my wolf stalking just beneath the surface, restless in a way I don't like.

The sound of moving water reaches my ears before I see it, a soft ripple against the stillness of the night. I move closer, steps instinctive, cautious, until the trees part just enough to reveal the scene before me.

She's standing in the stream—naked—her neatly folded clothes setting on a rock.

Moonlight filters through the canopy, glinting off the rippling surface of the water, casting her in silver and shadow. Her bare skin glows in the dim light, droplets tracing the sharp planes of her shoulders, rolling down the curve of her back. She moves like she's part of the water itself, dipping beneath the surface before reappearing, slick and untamed.

I shouldn't be here. I should turn around before she catches my scent, before I make a mistake I can't take back, but I don't.

My hands tighten at my sides as she turns, running wet fingers through her hair, her eyes half-closed, unaware of the fact that she's not alone. There's something about her—something dangerous—not in the way of an enemy, but in the way of a storm you see coming and walk straight into, anyway. The movement is slight. The briefest turn of her head, her shoulders stiffening just enough to tell me she's sensed me.

Her gaze flicks toward the trees, toward where I stand, hidden but not hidden enough. For a second, neither of us move. Her lips part, a slow realization settling over her features. Then, instead of reaching for something to cover herself, instead of looking away like any other sane person caught in this situation, she smiles.

"See something you like, Stone?"

Her voice is low, husky, not at all startled. The arrogance in her tone should make me turn on my heel and leave her to her moonlit bath. But I don't move.

I step forward, slow, deliberate, letting her see that I'm not ashamed of looking. "You should be more careful where you decide to strip down, Windrider."

She leans against a partially submerged rock, stretching her arms out along the edges, watching me with those too-perceptive, too-bold eyes. "Should I?"

I cross my arms, leveling her with a stare. "You're not in your territory."

She arches an eyebrow. "I don't have a territory." She tilts her head, assessing me in that way she does, as if she's deciding what to do with me rather than the other way around. "You tracked me," she says after a beat. "Why?"

That's the question, isn't it?

I force my voice to stay even, my control razor-thin. "Making sure you're not up to anything."

Sophia grins, slow and sharp. "Liar." She runs a hand down her arm, lazy, teasing, watching for my reaction like she knows exactly what game she's playing.

Arousal surges through my veins before I can stop it. My wolf stirs, watching her the way a predator watches something it doesn't know whether to chase or sink its teeth into.

"If I didn't know better, I'd say you wanted to be here."

My jaw tightens. "You don't know better."

She hums, pushing off the rock, wading toward the edge of the stream. The water skims her waist, licking at the edges of her body, tracing over curves I shouldn't be looking at, shouldn't be noticing.

I step back. "Get dressed."

Her grin widens. "What's the matter, Stone? Don't you enjoy seeing me naked? Does it bother you, Lucas?"

My name on her lips does something. Something I don't like.

I turn away, giving her my back. "I'm on patrol. Stay out of Nightshade business."

She laughs softly. "Don't you mean stay out of your way?"

"Same thing," I mutter, walking off before I do something I'll regret.

Her voice follows me, wrapping around me like a damn invitation I know I shouldn't accept, and I already know—I'm going to see her again, whether or not I want to.

I walk away, ignoring her—her laughter following me—or at least I was, before Sophia's voice wraps around me like a challenge I can't ignore.

"Didn't think you were the type to run, Stone," she calls, amusement laced through her voice.

I stop, my back still to her, hands curled into fists. I should keep going. I should let this go. But I do none of those. Instead, I turn.

She's still in the water, standing now, droplets tracing the curves of her bare skin, silvered by the moonlight filtering through the canopy. She should look vulnerable,

caught like this. She doesn't. There's nothing vulnerable about Sophia McKenna.

She tilts her head, watching me like I'm the one caught instead of her. "You can pretend all you want, but we both know you didn't track me down so you could patrol your borders."

I keep my expression unreadable. "You're in my territory. I needed to be sure you weren't up to something."

That makes her laugh out loud, bending forward, which results in her luscious breasts jiggling temptingly. "And do you consider me a threat?"

She has no idea. I don't answer, because every response that comes to mind is a mistake.

She takes a step toward the edge of the stream, water lapping at her thighs. "You're still looking."

I should force my eyes away. I should tell her to get dressed and leave. I don't.

Instead, I meet her gaze, steady and unflinching. "You want to play games, Windrider? You will not like how this one ends."

Her grin widens, slow and knowing. "I don't know about that. Given the size of the bulge in your jeans, I think I might enjoy myself a great deal."

The challenge hangs in the air between us, electric, like a storm building on the horizon. My wolf watches her just as intently as I do, torn between the instinct to dominate and the knowledge that Sophia isn't the kind of woman who submits easily—if at all.

She reaches for the rock where she folded her clothes but doesn't bother covering herself. Instead, she stretches her arms overhead, unapologetically baring herself to the night, like she knows exactly what she's doing to me—daring me to do something about it.

"You don't like losing control, do you?" she muses.

I let out a slow breath, my patience wearing thin. "And you do like testing limits you don't understand."

Her gaze locks onto mine, sharp and deliberate. "You think I don't understand you?"

"I think you don't know what you're asking for," I say, my voice lower than I intend.

She steps out of the water, still drenched, still glistening with moonlight, her hair clinging to her bare shoulders, curling around her nipples. She doesn't rush to dress. She just stands there, watching me, like she's waiting for me to break first.

Something inside me snaps. One second, I'm holding the line. The next, I'm in front of her, so close I can feel the warmth radiating from her damp skin.

Sophia doesn't flinch, doesn't back down. She lifts her chin, eyes burning with something dangerous and reckless.

I grab her wrist, slow but firm, giving her one last chance to walk away. "Get dressed Sophia. You don't want this fight."

She lets out a soft laugh, husky and full of something wicked. "Oh, but I think I do."

Then she moves.

I don't know who starts it, but suddenly we're on each other, the space between us gone in a clash of heat and instinct. My mouth slants over hers, demanding, taking, daring her to push back—and she does.

She fists a hand in my shirt, pulling me closer instead of shoving me away. Her other hand slides up my chest, nails scraping just enough to send a pulse of fire through my veins. I fist her hair, tilting her head just the way I want before biting down on her bottom lip, pulling a sharp breath from her throat.

She presses up against me, forcing me to meet her halfway, her kiss a battle neither of us wants to lose. Her teeth graze my lip, answering my bite with one of her own, her body arching against mine like she's already claiming me right back.

My control, already razor-thin, shreds into nothing.

I lift her, her legs wrapping around my waist like it's the most natural thing in the world as I carry her away from the stream and pin her back against the tree behind us. The rough bark scrapes against her skin, and she laughs into my mouth, like she likes it.

"You're going to be a problem," I mutter, dragging my lips down her throat, feeling the wild pulse beneath her skin.

Her fingers tangle in my hair, pulling me back up to meet her mouth again, hungry and unrepentant. "So stop pretending you don't like problems."

I growl, crushing my mouth to hers again, deepening the kiss until we're out of breath and out of excuses. Damn her. Damn me. Damn, whatever this is between us.

Sophia tastes like fire and storm, wild and untamed, the way the air crackles before a lightning strike. Her body is tightly wedged between me and the rough, unyielding

bark; she grips my hair like a lifeline and her warm breath mingles fiercely with mine. Instincts roar for more, obliterating my self-control, but a desperate fragment of sanity claws its way out, dragging me back from the precipice.

This wasn't supposed to happen. Not with her. Not with such intensity, but halting seems an insurmountable task. I crash my lips onto hers—one arm braced beneath her, holding her up, while my other hand clutches her hair with fervor. I have her completely ensnared between my body and the tree.

Her nipples, hard like diamond shards, pierce through the fabric of my shirt. I devour her mouth until we are both gasping for air, yet my hunger remains insatiable. The relentless ridge of my erection grinds against the apex of her thighs, brushing her clit and drawing a raw, primal moan from her lips.

I force myself to stop, pulling back just enough to put space between us. My grip on her hips tightens before I set her on her feet, letting go completely and stepping away as if distance alone will erase what just happened.

It doesn't.

Sophia blinks up at me, still flushed, still breathing hard. Still watching me like she knows exactly what's running through my head.

"You're going to act like that didn't just happen?" she asks, voice husky.

I scrub a hand through my hair, taking another step back. "It shouldn't have."

She huffs a quiet laugh, shaking her head. "That's not what I asked."

I grit my teeth, my pulse hammering in my ears. This—whatever the hell this is—was a mistake. She's a Windrider, a disruption my pack doesn't need. A distraction I

don't need.

And yet, my damn wolf is still growling and stalking the edges of my control, furious that I stepped away.

Sophia tilts her head, studying me. "Let me guess. You're going to tell yourself this was just lust. Some base instinct. Nothing important."

"It isn't," I snap before I can stop myself.

She looks at me skeptically, still standing there completely bare under the moonlight, completely unapologetic. "That's adorable," she muses. "Really. Keep telling yourself that, Stone."

I narrow my eyes. "Don't."

"Don't what?" She steps forward, closing the space I just put between us, and I curse my own stupidity for not looking away.

Sophia isn't just beautiful. She's dangerous. She's the kind of woman who doesn't just set a fire and walk away. She burns until there's nothing left.

"I don't play games," I grind out, jaw tight.

She leans in just enough for her scent to wrap around me again—only this time, it is heavy with arousal. Her lips hover near my jaw. "Neither do I," she murmurs.

My fingers twitch with the urge to grab her again, to pull her back against me and remind us both of how real that kiss was. But real or not, it changes nothing. This isn't fate. This is a mistake waiting to happen.

I force myself to turn away, to walk, even as my wolf fights me every step of the way.

Sophia doesn't stop me. She just watches, a knowing little hum of amusement under her breath, as if she already knew I'd run—that only pisses me off more.

I don't look back. I force my feet to move, my muscles locked with restraint as I push through the trees, away from her, away from the mess I just made.

Every step feels wrong. Every inch of distance a mistake. But I keep going, because if I don't, I won't stop.

Sophia McKenna is the kind of problem I won't survive.

CHAPTER 3

SOPHIA

My feelings are a mixture of amusement and fury. What the fuck was that?

One minute, Lucas Stone is all but devouring me against a tree, his hands and mouth promising things I know neither of us should want, and the next? He's storming off like he just realized he enjoyed it too much.

I sit on a fallen log near our camp, rubbing my temples as Kylie pokes at the fire with a stick. The embers glow orange and red, sending small sparks into the night. My father and the rest of the pack have moved on, leaving Oscar, Kylie and I to try to see what we can find out that might be helpful in figuring out whatever the hell is going on.

"You look like someone just insulted your entire bloodline," Kylie observes, glancing at me from beneath dark lashes.

I shoot her a glare that promises pain. "I don't want to talk about it."

Kylie's lips twitch, but she wisely keeps whatever teasing remark she's dying to say to herself.

Oscar isn't nearly as considerate. "You disappeared for a while earlier. Went off into the woods. Came back looking like you ran through a storm."

I pick up a small rock and throw it at him. He dodges easily, grinning.

"So, are we pretending nothing happened, or are we going to admit you got into it with a certain grumpy Nightshade wolf?"

I don't answer. I don't have to.

Kylie leans forward, intrigued. "Define 'got into it.'"

Oscar stretches, looking smug as hell. "Let's just say Sophia has a look about her. Like she's either extremely pissed off or extremely..." He gestures vaguely with his hands.

"Shut up, Oscar."

He laughs, but his expression sharpens. "If you're getting tangled up with Lucas, that's not just a mistake—it's a distraction. We're here to figure out this birthrate crisis, not play dominance games with the Nightshade beta."

I grit my teeth, pushing to my feet. "I know exactly why we're here. Which is why I'm going to do what I set out to do instead of sitting around gossiping like a bunch of elders who have nothing better to do."

Oscar looks at me. "And where exactly are you going?"

"To check out the latest missing wolf report. A Nightshade tracker vanished three nights ago. And I don't think it's just random."

Kylie straightens. "Wait, three nights ago? That's the same day your father moved the pack after that Windrider scout disappeared near the southern pass."

My stomach twists. That's not a coincidence.

I grab my gear and head toward the eastern ridge, Oscar and Kylie falling into step behind me. The forest is alive with the hum of nocturnal creatures, but beneath that, there's something off. The wind carries a scent that doesn't belong—faint, metallic, laced with something sharp and unnatural.

Kylie stiffens. "Tell me you smell that."

Oscar scans the trees, his eyes shifting slightly, his wolf close to the surface. "Blood mixed with something else."

We move quickly, following the scent until we come across a disturbance in the undergrowth. Broken branches, claw marks along the trunks. Signs of a struggle—in the middle of it, a smear of red in a gross representation of claw marks across the bark.

Kylie crouches, running her fingers over the dried markings. "These aren't normal claw marks. Look at the color."

Oscar kneels beside her, his jaw tightening. "That's not natural. That's..."

"Not from any pack we know," I finish, my pulse kicking up.

The marks aren't just red—they're unnaturally bright, like something tainted with something—magic, maybe?

This isn't just about missing wolves anymore. This is something much, much worse. And when I tell him, I'm pretty damn sure Lucas Stone will not like it.

The unnatural claw marks stretch across the bark in jagged slashes, the blood dried to

an eerie, almost glowing shade of crimson. Everything about this feels wrong. Not just the scent of old blood or the lingering traces of something off in the air—it's the way the forest itself seems to hold its breath around the scene.

Oscar runs his fingers along one of the deeper grooves in the wood, frowning. "These aren't normal attack marks."

Kylie crouches beside him, scraping a bit of the dried blood onto a cloth. "You're telling me. No wolf's claws are like this."

I narrow my eyes. "No shit. I think we can all agree this is the mark of the Crimson Claw—thus the name."

Kylie glances up, brow furrowing. I scan the area again, gut instinct screaming at me we're missing something. The Nightshade scout who disappeared three nights ago vanished in this exact area—so did the Windrider tracker. Two wolves from different packs, different lives, different abilities, both taken without a trace beyond this.

Whatever did this isn't just hunting. I glance at the red-streaked bark again, then over at the disturbed ground. Something big came through here. This is wrong, something darker than what we've seen before, but is it the Crimson Claw? There's no way to say at this point.

I let out a slow breath and force my focus forward. "We're not going to find the answers standing around here. Let's head to Shadow Hollow. We need supplies, and I want to check in with the locals."

Kylie wipes her hands on her pants, then swings her bag over her shoulder. "You mean you want to see if the others know more than the council is letting on?"

I flash her a grin. "I knew I kept you around for a reason."

Moonlight Café

Shadow Hollow, Washington

Shadow Hollow is the kind of town that doesn't change much—its charm never seems to fade. Vintage storefronts lining a neat and tidy Main Street with the same old men sitting outside the general store playing chess like they've been doing it since the dawn of time. The same enticing aromas coming from the bakery, and the same café beckoning me.

But there's something in the air today, something just beneath the usual chatter and small-town bustle. A quiet unease, an unspoken tension hanging between the shopkeepers and the passing customers.

Kylie nudges my arm as we pass the apothecary. "Feel that?"

I nod. "Something's got them rattled."

Oscar steps ahead, opening the door to the Moonlight Café, and the moment we step inside, I hear it.

"—three more wolves gone, Marjorie. That's not normal."

I stop just inside the doorway, picking up a menu from the table just inside the door. I pretend to scan the menu as I try to eavesdrop on what's being said.

At the far end of the café, Marjorie Reed, the owner, leans against the counter, her arms folded as she whispers to two other women sitting at a corner booth. She's an older woman, sharp-eyed and perceptive, the kind of person who knows everything that happens in Shadow Hollow before it even happens.

"Could be those mutants..." one of the women says, glancing around as if to check for eavesdroppers.

Marjorie nods her head, lips pressed tight. "Could just be the Crimson Claw acting out. My nephew lives out by Ash Creek. He says they found bodies. But the way they were torn apart..." She lowers her voice further.

I lean toward them—hoping I'm subtle enough not to be noticed—my pulse picking up.

Kylie tilts her head slightly, her hearing sharper than mine. "She's talking about something that happened a couple of weeks ago... something about bodies being found that didn't seem right. They're spooked..." she murmurs under her breath.

My stomach clenches. Not right? That doesn't sound good. What the café owner is describing sounds an awful lot like the mutant rumor Blackwood was dancing around.

Oscar steps up to the counter, ordering coffee as a cover while I stay locked on Marjorie and her conversation.

"That damn regional council doesn't want to admit it," Marjorie continues, voice hushed. "But the threat from the Crimson Claw is spreading. The council's pretending they've got it under control, but if you ask me? They know nothing more than they did when poor Arthur died. Something's coming—maybe it's the Crimson Claw, and maybe it's not—but the council doesn't know a damn thing about how to stop it."

Her words send a slow pulse of dread through me.

Kylie grabs a napkin and pretends to wipe her mouth, muttering low. "We need to

talk to her. Alone."

I glance at Marjorie, then at the way she keeps glancing toward the window, as if expecting something to be watching. Whatever she knows, she's already afraid, and if she's afraid, maybe we should be too.

Before I get the chance to pull her aside, the café door swings open, the little bell above it chiming once. A shift ripples through the room, subtle but undeniable. Conversations quiet just a fraction, a few gazes flicking toward the entrance before looking away.

I don't have to turn around to know who just walked in. Lucas Stone has that kind of presence—the kind that commands attention even when he's not trying. Still, I glance over my shoulder just to confirm. Yep. There he is.

He stands just inside the door, broad shoulders squared, golden eyes sharp as they immediately lock onto mine. He looks like he never left the forest, the wildness of the mountain still clinging to him.

His expression? Unreadable.

Mine? Probably not.

Beside me, Kylie mutters under her breath, "This should be fun."

Lucas doesn't waste time. He moves straight toward me, dodging tables and chairs with predatory ease, stopping just close enough that I have to tip my chin up to meet his gaze.

"We need to talk," he says, voice low.

I cross my arms, letting my expression stay neutral, even though my pulse picks up like it has no damn sense. "That's funny. Last time I saw you, you were walking away from me like your life depended on it."

Kylie snickers behind me, but Lucas doesn't take the bait. His gaze flicks to her and Oscar, then back to me. "Outside. Now."

I narrow my eyes, but before I can tell him exactly where he can shove his demands, Marjorie clears her throat loudly from behind the counter.

"Not in my café, Lucas," she warns, giving him the kind of look only a woman who's been dealing with difficult men her whole life can pull off.

Lucas doesn't even glance her way. "Outside, Sophia."

Something in his tone—something that tells me he's not here to pick another fight, no matter how much we seem to enjoy them—makes me reconsider snapping at him.

Instead, I sigh dramatically, shooting Kylie a quick look before stepping away from the table. "Fine," I say, brushing past him. "But if this is some kind of a weak attempt at an apology, you can save your breath."

The door swings shut behind us, and Lucas guides me to the town square—complete with gazebo and decorative vintage streetlights on each corner—cutting off the noise of the café, leaving only the quiet of the square itself.

Lucas doesn't speak right away. He just looks at me, his wolf just under the surface, watching, waiting. Finally, he says, "We've got a problem."

I huff a laugh. "Just one? Because I've got about ten, and at least four of them involve you."

His jaw tightens, but instead of rising to the bait like I half expect, he says, "Your people found something. Claw marks that don't belong to any known pack. Am I right?"

I go still.

"How do you know that?"

His golden eyes darken slightly. "Because we found the same thing near the north ridge. Arthur Whitfield found the first ones, and we thought we'd beat them back, but now we've got missing wolves from more than one pack."

Something stirs in my chest, an uneasy realization settling in. The council might pretend they have things under control, but Lucas and I both know the truth. No one is safe.

He watches my expression closely, reading me too easily, and I hate I know he's right. "We need to scout the area together," he says, stepping closer. "My brother and our men have their hands full, keeping our own pack safe. You can fight me on this, or you can admit that those of you your father left behind will not get the answers on their own."

My fingers twitch, my warped sense of humor and self-preservation both beg me to push back just for the sake of doing it. But what do they know?

Instead, I meet his gaze evenly. "Fine. But let's get one thing straight, Stone—I don't take orders from you."

His mouth twitches—like he's holding back a grin. Then, he leans in slightly, his voice a quiet rumble of challenge. "We'll see about that."

Lucas shakes his head, turning away and stalks off. Damn him. Damn me. Because for some insane reason, I'm looking forward to finding out what happens next.

CHAPTER 4

LUCAS

By the time the sun dips below the ridgeline, I've had just about enough of everything.

Sophia. The Windriders. The council's useless, hollow reassurances. The fact that my own damn wolf won't shut up about something I don't even want to think about, much less act on. Well, I do want to act on it, but fucking Sophia McKenna wouldn't solve a thing and would create a whole other set of problems.

Storming out of the lodge, I slam the door behind me, needing space, needing air, and ignoring my older brother. Bad enough to ignore family, but he's alpha of The Nightshade Pack and gets pissy when he gets ignored. The lodge is the pack's headquarters. It's a massive timber and stone structure nestled into the mountain, and has always been and felt like home. Right now, it just feels like a goddamn prison.

I hear Ryder following me out onto the porch and calling to me. "Don't go too far," he warns anyway, his voice even. "Whatever's out there—it's getting bolder."

What am I? Twelve? I don't bother responding. My boots pad over damp earth as I make my way toward the tree line, stripping off my shirt and tossing it over a low-hanging branch. My boots and jeans follow, kicked aside as the cool mountain air prickles over my bare skin.

Then, I let go and my wolf rushes forward. The shift takes me fast. Energy pulses

through my body, electricity surging through every nerve, the air ripping apart around me as the mist swirls thick. My human form dissolves into something more, something primal. The mist thickens, crackling with light, the sound of distant thunder rolling through my bones. Then—release, and the mist dissipates and all four paws hit the ground.

My wolf shakes itself out, powerful and steady, fur standing on end as my instincts sharpen to their highest edge. The world around me changes—sounds stretch, scents intensify, every detail clearer, crisper, closer.

My wolf takes off without hesitation, muscles bunching, paws kicking up dirt and leaves as I streak through the forest, leaping over fallen trees and other obstacles. The ground flies beneath me, trees blurring past in streaks of green and gold, my body moving with an effortless power that only comes in this form.

This is what I need. No expectations. No endless questions I don't want to answer. Just the wild, the rhythm of my stride, the wind slicing through my fur as I push faster, harder, farther.

But even here, my thoughts won't be quiet.

Sophia McKenna. Even her name unsettles something in me. She's reckless. Arrogant. Stubborn as hell. She plays by her own rules, and worst of all—she doesn't seem to care that she's in my way. She challenges me, and my wolf likes it.

That's the problem. My instincts have never betrayed me before. I've always known what's right, what's necessary. But now? I don't know what the hell I'm supposed to do.

I push forward, my paws hitting stone as I move higher into the mountains, beyond the usual Nightshade borders. The air up here is colder, purer, the scent of pine strong

enough to ground me, but my wolf isn't searching for grounding. It's searching for something else.

The unease tightens in my chest, an unfamiliar restlessness curling through my gut. What the hell am I looking for?

My claws scrape over the rock as I slow, my breathing steady, my ears pricked for any sign of movement. The forest is alive, full of quiet sounds—small creatures burrowing, birds shifting in the trees, the distant trickle of a stream.

But beneath all of it, there's something off. A pulse, faint but steady, tugging at the edges of my awareness. I don't like it. I don't understand it. And yet, I follow it. I move deeper into the valley, further away from the lodge. My wolf is tracking something—something that shouldn't feel like home.

The mountains stretch wide and endless around me, the ridgeline cutting through the sky like a jagged scar. The pull hasn't lessened. If anything, it's getting stronger, tugging at my instincts, making my muscles coil with a restless energy I can't shake. The wind shifts, carrying something familiar.

Sophia—the scent of her, a mix of storm-laced air and wild earth, lingers on the wind. My wolf stops, ears pricking forward, instincts sharpening like the edge of a blade.

I don't think. I lift my head and let out a howl—long, deep, ringing through the valley with a force that sends birds scattering from the treetops. It's a call I shouldn't have made, and yet, almost immediately, an answer rises from the other side of the ridge—Sophia.

Her howl differs from mine, higher, laced with a challenge, an edge of something almost teasing, almost daring. My wolf stills completely, listening, every instinct locked onto that single sound.

Then, I move. My paws hit the ground hard as I launch forward, tearing up the earth beneath me, racing toward the ridge, toward her. A vibrant rush of green and gold blurs past, the wind a roaring symphony in my ears as I ascend, primal urges overriding my conscious thoughts.

I crest the ridge just as she steps into the clearing below. Sophia's wolf is smaller than mine but just as strong, built for speed and agility, her fur a sleek silver-gray that gleams under the moonlight. She moves with the kind of confidence that dares the world to try to stop her.

She knew I was coming. She is waiting for me. We stand at opposite ends of the clearing, watching, waiting.

The pull between us is undeniable, stronger in this form, more instinctive. Something ancient and unrelenting thrums beneath our standoff. I shake my head, trying to dispel the dizziness, the buzzing in my brain. It can't be. I won't let it be.

She moves first—a slow step forward, calculated, testing. I lower my head, eyes locked on hers, matching each of her steps with one of my own. We circle one another, wary but unable to walk away.

The wind shifts again, carrying our scents between us, mixing in the space we haven't yet closed. They seem to swirl together, almost as if they are embracing. My wolf's instincts scream to take control, to dominate, to make her yield.

I have a gut feeling that could hurt—one or both of us. I doubt she's ever yielded to anyone. She moves closer, brushing the edge of my personal space, her tail flicking behind her, ears twitching in curiosity. It's a test—one I refuse to fail.

I growl low, a warning. She huffs out a breath, amused, and then does something I don't expect. She lunges. Not an attack, at least not entirely, but a push, a challenge.

Her teeth snap at my shoulder, not drawing blood, but demanding a response.

Giving her one, I strike back, faster, stronger, knocking her off balance just enough to send her skidding slightly in the dirt. She recovers instantly, spinning back toward me, eyes flashing.

She's not afraid; she's enjoying this. The realization slams into me hard, shaking something loose in my chest. She's playing with me. Testing me. Just like she does in human form.

And my wolf? It wants to play back.

She charges me again, this time faster, and I let her get closer before I make a countermove. We crash together in a blur of fur and snarls, a battle for dominance neither of us seems eager to win or lose. She's fast. She's smart. She moves like she's been fighting her whole life, like she knows exactly how to adapt, how to keep up.

But I'm bigger, stronger. I use it to my advantage, catching her mid-lunge, pinning her briefly beneath me before she twists out of my grasp, escaping by the thinnest margin.

We break apart, panting, circling again.

Her eyes meet mine, burning with something I know I reflect in my gaze.

Recognition. Something deeper than instinct. Something we've been ignoring.

For a moment, neither of us moves. The wind howls through the trees, stirring the tension in the air, the heat between us thick and crackling like a live wire.

I should walk away. I should leave her here, go back to my pack, pretend this never

happened. Instead, I take another step closer... so does she.

Sophia and I circle each other, two predators caught in a moment that neither of us wants to break. Her wolf watches me with sharp, burning eyes, her muscles coiled, poised. She should have run. I should have let her or walked away on my own. But neither of us seems to be able to. We stand on the edge of something dangerous, something neither of us is ready to admit.

She flicks her tail, watching me carefully, her wolf's body angled just enough to keep me guessing. A challenge. My wolf tenses, instincts clashing in my head, but before I can decide what to do, she moves—fast. Not toward me, but past me.

She bolts toward the trees, paws kicking up earth, her silver-gray coat flashing in the moonlight. My wolf reacts before my mind can catch up. I give chase.

We streak through the forest, cutting through the undergrowth, dodging between trees, our bodies weaving in and out of the shadows. It's not a fight. It's something else. Something just as primal, just as wild.

Running together.

Sophia is fast. She moves like a creature built for the hunt, sleek and agile, slipping through the trees like the wind itself. But I'm bigger, stronger, and when she veers left, trying to gain distance, I push harder, closing the gap.

Her scent wraps around me, electric and alive. She glances back, eyes gleaming in the dark, and lets out a low, teasing growl. She's playing with me. Daring me to catch her.

My wolf answers the challenge. I lunge forward, driving my paws into the earth, propelling myself toward her. She laughs in the way only a wolf can, quick and sharp,

darting just out of my reach.

She likes this. So do I.

We race through the trees, chasing each other through the night, neither one of us willing to stop, neither one of us ready to end whatever this is.

The moon hangs heavy in the sky, bathing the valley in silver light. We move in sync, our strides aligning, our instincts pulling us closer and closer to something we shouldn't want but can't deny.

This is dangerous. This is a mistake. I don't care; neither does she.

The mountains open up before us, the sky bleeding from black to deep blue, the first hints of dawn creeping over the ridgeline. We slow, our pace easing into something steady, something natural.

Sophia's wolf glances at me, her ears flicking forward, the energy between us humming with something undeniable. We stop at the edge of a clearing, standing side by side, our breath heavy in the crisp morning air.

A silent truce.

A moment neither of us is willing to break.

Then, without warning, she moves.

Mist curls around her form, wrapping her in a cocoon of storm-lit energy, lightning flickering through the dense fog. The crackling swirl lasts only a few seconds, and when it clears, she stands before me—human again.

Naked.

Her hair is loose, tumbling over her shoulders, her sharp eyes locked onto mine like she's waiting to see what I'll do. Waiting to see if I'll follow suit. I do.

The shift wraps around me, swallowing my form in a haze of thunder and light, my body reforming, my senses snapping back into human focus.

The second the mist clears, I'm standing before her, bare, exposed, nowhere to hide. Silence stretches between us, thick with everything we aren't saying. Her gaze drifts over me—not in embarrassment, but curiosity, acknowledgment.

She doesn't look away. Neither do I.

She lets out a slow breath, lifting her chin. "You going to just stand there, Stone?"

I should tell her that whatever the hell this is, it doesn't change a damn thing. I should remind her she's still a Windrider, that I'm still Nightshade, that our packs have never been allies, but the words won't come. Instead, I hold her gaze, my jaw tight, my instincts still snarling.

Sophia's lips curl slightly, but there's no humor in it, no tease. Just understanding.

She shakes her head, grabbing the bundle of clothes she must have left nearby. "Thought so," she murmurs as she turns away.

I reach out, grab her wrist, and drag her to the ground, grappling with her until I pin her beneath me. She can't move, but she doesn't struggle. I keep her wrists trapped in one of my hands, pinning her arms above her head. Her body stretches out beneath me—slick with sweat and need and exposed to the cool night air. A low growl vibrates through my chest before I mark her with slow, wet kisses, drowning her in

my scent.

"Lucas, this is a bad idea..."

"I don't care."

The scent of her arousal is overwhelming. I'm aching for her and she's wet, ripe and ready for me. I hold her down, spreading her legs as I settle between them, pressing the head of my cock against the entrance to her core. I don't push in and chuckle as she whimpers in frustration.

She arches her hips, silently pleading, but I hold her still. I'm stronger than she is, unyielding, and all she can do is surrender. Her scent surrounds me, my weight holding her down. She hisses as I run my hands over her, every part of me caging her in.

When I finally push inside, she moans in abject pleasure. I'm well-endowed and my cock stretches her pussy, but her body takes mine in greedily. She needs to be filled, and I need to fill her. Her walls clench around my length, pulling me deeper.

I give her little time to adjust before I start to move powerfully within her. I need this... need her. The forest fades around us, my world narrowing to her heat surrounding me. Sophia goes limp, surrendering completely.

My eyes close. Every thrust is harder than the last, reducing us both to pure sensation. My thrusts turn rough, desperate until I give a final thrust and her body clamps down on me, holding me tight as I empty myself deep inside her—flooding the ache, soothing the need. Pleasure crashes over me, raw and consuming, ripping a primal howl from my throat.

The heat fades. The desperation ebbs. Satisfaction takes its place, deeper and more

fulfilling than anything else. I roll from her, but before I can pull her close, she moves away, calling forth her she-wolf before grasping her sweater in her jaws and charges off.

How the fuck can she do that? I'm fucking spent. I let her run... let her think nothing had changed. We both know differently.

CHAPTER 5

SOPHIA

Books never used to frustrate me. They were steady. Reliable. They never judged. Never looked at me like Lucas Stone does. And yet, right now, as I stare at the scattered pages of old Windrider lore spread across my borrowed desk in the library at the Nightshade Pack's main lodge—courtesy of an invitation from the alpha and his mate—all I want to do is set the entire damn pile on fire.

I shove a hand through my hair, glaring at the ancient texts like they're personally responsible for the mess my life has become. Maybe they are. Because if what I'm reading is true, then I'm about to have a whole new problem.

One I don't want and sure as hell didn't ask for.

Oscar sits across from me, arms crossed, watching me with his usual mix of patience and amusement. Kylie lounges on the chesterfield couch, flipping a dagger between her fingers like she's waiting for me to break first.

"Tell me again why you suddenly care about Windrider legends?" Oscar asks.

I glare at him. "I've always cared about Windrider legends."

Kylie snorts. "Bullshit; you rarely lock yourself in a room and go full scholar mode unless you're avoiding something. Or someone."

I slam a book shut and level her with a look. “I’m researching. Not avoiding.”

Oscar arches an eyebrow. “Researching what, exactly?”

My fingers tighten around the leather-bound book in front of me. Everything.

I don’t say that, of course. Instead, I flip the book open to the passage that’s been haunting me since I found it. “This.”

Kylie sits up, stretching lazily before swinging her legs over the edge of the sofa. “Let’s hear it.”

I skim down the page, reading aloud.

‘It is said that among the Windriders, there are rare wolves bound not by choice, but by fate. The soulbound. Those called by the land itself. When the earth begins to fracture, when the balance shifts, these wolves will find each other, drawn by forces older than time itself.’

I glance up.

Kylie looks unimpressed. Oscar frowns. “That sounds like a story meant to scare children into behaving.”

I tap the page. “Keep reading.”

The bond must not be ignored. It cannot be undone. The longer the wolves fight it, the stronger it becomes, until finally ? —’

I snap the book shut. Silence stretches between us.

Kylie eyes me, something sharp and knowing in her expression. “Until finally... what?”

I shove the book away, crossing my arms. “Doesn’t matter.”

Oscar leans forward. “Doesn’t matter? Or you just don’t want to say it out loud?”

I grind my teeth. “It’s a stupid myth.”

Kylie’s grin is slow, teasing. “So... what you’re saying is, you think Lucas Stone might be your fated mate?”

I grab the nearest book and throw it at her head. She dodges, laughing.

Oscar shakes his head, looking far too entertained for my liking. “It would explain a lot.”

I point a finger at him. “Don’t.”

“Don’t what?” He tilts his head. “Point out the fact that since we got here, you and Lucas have been dancing around each other like two wolves in heat?”

Kylie snickers. “I’d say they already stopped dancing and got to the fun part.”

I glare. “Not helping.”

Oscar rubs his jaw, his expression shifting from amusement to something closer to concern. “Look, I get it. If this soulbond thing is real, it complicates things. But...” He hesitates. “Sophia, what if it’s not just legend?”

I scoff, but it sounds forced. “Come on, you really believe this crap?”

Kylie leans back on her hands. “I believe that whatever’s happening between you and Lucas, it’s not normal. And considering we’re currently dealing with disappearing wolves, mutated shifters, and land that feels off, I wouldn’t be so quick to dismiss an ancient Windrider warning about balance breaking.”

I don’t have a good response to that, because she’s right.

Something is wrong here. And it’s not just the missing wolves or the Crimson Claw attacks. It’s in the air, in the earth, in the way my wolf won’t stop looking toward Lucas like he’s the answer to a question I don’t want to ask.

I sigh heavily and shove the book aside. “Fine. Let’s say for argument’s sake, this story isn’t complete nonsense. What then? What am I supposed to do? Walk up to Lucas and say, ‘Hey, I know we’ve been avoiding whatever the hell this is, but fun fact—legend says we’re magically soulbound and fighting it will probably make things worse, so let’s just accept our fate?’”

Kylie grins. “I mean... it’d be a bold strategy.”

Oscar rolls his eyes. “You don’t have to tell him, but you need to be honest with yourself. If this bond is real, you can’t ignore it forever.”

“Watch me.”

Kylie laughs under her breath. “Oh, this is gonna be fun to watch.”

I glare at her. “It’s not happening.”

Oscar leans back in his chair. “You sure about that?”

I don’t answer. Because the truth? After what happened the other night, I’m not sure

about anything anymore.

I grab another book, flipping it open, pretending I still give a damn about research. But my mind isn't on the words. It's on him. It's on what happened and why I want it to happen again.

It's the way he looks at me whenever we see each other, like he wants to tear me apart and put me back together in the same breath... On the way my wolf went still the moment his lips touched mine... On the way my instincts whisper that I already know the truth.

I don't want to believe in legends. I don't want to believe in soulbonds. But the problem is... I don't think I have a choice.

After several days of Oscar, Kylie and I traveling between the Nightshade Pack's compound and our camp, Ryder has invited us to stay. The lodge is bigger than I expected. Stone and timber, soaring beams, and windows that overlook the ridge like the forest was carved just to cradle it. There's a quiet power in the architecture—a structure made to withstand storms, time, and everything in between.

It fits the people who live here—Ryder, Isabella and Lucas, plus those who work in the house, mostly the kitchen staff.

The lodge smells like Lucas—cedar, pine, and heat. I hate how easily I notice it. I'm sure there are other aromas, but they don't register with me. His scent overwhelms all of my senses.

I trail behind Ryder through the wide entry hall as he leads us to the guest wing. Oscar and Kylie follow close, each of us a little too alert, like we're being walked into enemy territory, even if the words say otherwise.

“This place is...” Kylie whistles under her breath. “Not what I expected from a bunch of settled wolves.”

Ryder glances over his shoulder. “We don’t live in caves, you know.”

Kylie grins, unbothered. “No, but I figured you’d be a little less... Pottery Barn meets Viking warlord.”

I cover a snort with my hand. Oscar glares at her. Ryder just keeps walking.

We pass through a vaulted common room with leather couches, a massive stone fireplace, and shelves filled with books I’d love to get my hands on later. Everything feels curated but lived-in. Warm, grounded. The kind of place that’s easy to sink into if you’re not careful.

Ryder stops at the far hallway and gestures to three heavy oak doors. “You’ll each have your own room. Fully stocked. Fresh linens. You’re our guests, and you’ll be treated as such. But I expect mutual respect.”

Oscar nods. “We’re not here to cause problems.”

Marcus’ voice cuts in before Ryder can respond. “No. You’re just here to bring them.”

I stiffen. The elder stands at the end of the hallway, arms folded, his narrow face set in stone. His appearance suggests that the mountain the pack protects carved him—unyielding, brittle, and already braced for collapse.

“We’re not here to stir anything,” I say evenly. “We’re trying to help. Whether or not your pride likes it.”

His eyes narrow, cold and dismissive. “The last time outsiders claimed to be helping, we lost a quarter of our northern territory.”

“That wasn’t us.”

“No. But it will always be someone.”

I lift my chin. “I’m not interested in reliving your history. I’m interested in solving the problem you’re pretending isn’t getting worse.”

Ryder steps between us before Marcus can bark back. “Enough. They stay.”

Marcus’s jaw clenches. “You’re making a mistake.”

“That’s mine to make.” Ryder’s voice never rises, but it carries the kind of weight that silences the rest of us. “You’re dismissed, Marcus.”

For a second, I think the elder might challenge him, but finally, he nods sharply and disappears down the hallway, his disapproval trailing behind him like a storm cloud.

“Friendly guy,” Kylie mutters.

Ryder rubs a hand down his face. “He’s an elder from a different generation. His view of the world is shaped by scars most of us never had to earn. Give him time.”

Oscar stays quiet. So do I.

Ryder’s gaze flicks at me. “You found something in the library, didn’t you? That’s why you asked to see the archives.”

I don’t answer right away. I’m still trying to decide if I even believe what I read. Still

trying to figure out how to make sense of what's happening with Lucas... with me.

"It's nothing concrete," I say. "But it's... familiar. Stories my grandmother used to tell. Tales about soulbonds. About wolves connected not by choice but by destiny, but even more than fated mates. I thought they were bedtime nonsense, but now?" I trail off, not wanting to give too much.

Ryder watches me for a beat, then nods slowly. "Keep digging. But be careful what you stir up. Some stories are buried for a reason."

He heads back down the hallway, leaving us to settle in.

I open the door to my room and stop short. It's beautiful.

A king-sized bed with a dark wood frame sits beneath a window that overlooks the eastern ridge. A fireplace rests against the far wall, already stacked with logs. The scent of sage and cedar clings to the air. There's even a little sitting area with an oversized armchair and a woven blanket draped over the back.

Kylie whistles again behind me. "Damn, you scored the view room."

Oscar nods toward the end of the hall. "I'll scout the perimeter after sunset. Kylie, are you good for supplies tomorrow?"

"Already on it."

They disappear into their rooms, and I shut my door, leaning against it for a second longer than I should. This place might not be safe, but we might be needed here, and that scares me more than anything.

Later that night, the lodge buzzes with the energy of wolves who can feel something

coming. The air is tight with agitation. We're all waiting for the next Crimson Claw strike. They've already hit two outposts and a supply run. They're not attacking openly—but they're getting bolder.

Lucas hasn't said a word to me. I've seen him. Heard him. Felt him. He keeps his distance, which should make things easier, but it doesn't.

I try to focus on the legends, the signs, the way the land seems to shift under my feet, like it's whispering something I don't quite understand.

In Windrider lore, soulbonds were rare—wolves drawn together by the earth itself when the land fractured. The bond wasn't romantic. It wasn't sweet. It restored something broken. Something primal. Something we forgot.

I stare at the passage until the words blur together. Lucas isn't the kind of wolf who believes in fate. Oh, he believes Ryder and Isabella are fated mates, but he thinks they're a fluke. And me? I'm not the kind of wolf who wants to need anyone.

But here we are, and something tells me the earth doesn't care what either of us wants.

The air on the training grounds behind the lodge smells like rain and bruised grass. Silver clouds still streak the sky above, but the storm that threatened earlier has passed, leaving everything damp and charged.

I roll my shoulders and stretch, feet bare against the packed earth. I'm already sweating, and we haven't even started yet. Lucas stands across from me, chest bare and wearing only low-hung training pants that cling to his hips like they were tailored for distraction. And if they weren't enough, the cut chest and eight-pack abs are enough to make me drool.

Every night I hear his footsteps in the hallway outside my door. Each night they pause and I stand on the other side, listening. And then he moves down the hall to his own room.

This is stupid. Training with him is a bad idea. It always ends one of two ways—with bruises or with tension so sharp I could cut myself on it.

“Stop overthinking,” Lucas says, voice quiet but direct. “You’re already ten moves ahead in your head, which means your body’s going to be too slow to keep up.”

I look at him askance. “You trying to coach me or beat me?”

His eyes narrow just slightly. “Why can’t it be both?”

“Because I don’t need a coach.”

Lucas drops into a low stance, his muscles shifting beneath his skin, fluid and controlled. “Then keep up.”

The first few strikes are easy—test shots. Probing. We circle each other, barefoot in the dirt, hands up, focus razor sharp. I dart in, trying to catch him off guard, but he sidesteps, grabs my wrist, and uses my momentum to send me stumbling forward, swatting my backside as I stumble past him. I twist away, barely avoiding hitting the ground.

“Still overthinking,” he says, tone maddeningly calm.

“You’re still a condescending asshole.”

This time I lunge first, putting everything behind a low sweeping kick that forces him to jump back. He recovers fast, catching my wrist again, but I pivot my hips and roll

through, breaking his grip.

We separate. I'm breathing harder than I want him to see.

"Better," he says.

"Shut up."

He lunges. I duck and sidestep. His hand catches my waist, spinning me, but I twist with him and plant my foot against his thigh to push off. He doesn't let go.

We go down hard.

Lucas lands on his back. I land on top of him, one arm braced on his chest, legs straddling his hips. The contact is instant and electric.

Neither of us moves.

His eyes lock on mine, intense and primal. My heartbeat slams against my ribs. I should roll off him, should do literally anything else besides stay here like some kind of territorial idiot.

But I don't. His hand is still on my waist. Not hard, not holding, but not letting go, either. I lean in, close enough that his breath grazes my lips.

"This is your strategy?" he murmurs. "Straddle me into submission?"

I bite back a grin. "Seems like it's working."

His hand tightens, just slightly. Enough to make me feel it.

“You have no idea what you’re playing with.”

“I think I do.”

His eyes search mine, but not for weakness. For something else. Something darker. I feel the moment when he almost leans up and kisses me. His body coils beneath mine, every inch of him a silent dare. But he doesn’t.

I push up and off him instead, ignoring the disappointment. “Training’s over,” I say. “For now.”

Lucas gets to his feet slowly, brushing dirt from his skin. “We’ll pick it back up tomorrow.”

I don’t answer. I just walk off the field, pretending I don’t feel his eyes on me the whole way.

That night, I can’t sleep. It isn’t the first time. In fact, I haven’t had a decent night’s sleep since we moved to the lodge. When I enter the guest room, it’s warm, the fire crackling low, but my mind won’t quiet.

The moon filters through the massive window, casting a wash of silver over the floorboards. I sit in the armchair, knees drawn up under me, staring out the window and watching it rise higher in the sky.

My wolf is restless. Pacing. She doesn’t understand this game I’m trying to play—doesn’t understand why we keep running from what we both feel. I keep going over that story from the Windrider texts. Soulbound. Wolves drawn together not by logic or choice, but by something far older. It sounds beautiful and terrifying.

But what if that’s not what this is? What if Lucas isn’t my fated mate? What if he’s

just a mistake I should avoid at all costs? But what if I can't?

I think about the way he touched me today. The way our bodies knew each other before our minds could catch up. It wasn't romance—there was nothing soft about it. It was instinct. It was fire, and I'm not sure if I want to be consumed or saved.

A floorboard creaks in the hallway. My sense of hearing pricks up. My body tenses, but after a brief pause, the steps pass my door. I know it's him. I can feel it in the air, in the way the silence changes.

Lucas—always circling, always watching.

I press my forehead to my knees and close my eyes. The moon glows brighter outside the window, casting its light like a promise. Or a threat.

I don't know what Lucas is to me. Not yet. But something's coming, and I need to figure it out before it's too late.

CHAPTER 6

SOPHIA

What little sleep I got last night was restless. Oscar, Kylie and I have headed out into the wilderness beyond the Nightshade's forest. We're Windriders. Staying in one place for any length of time is difficult for us.

The forest is still—too still. No birdsong. No rustle of leaves from foraging creatures. Just the cold bite of pine-saturated air and the soft crunch of damp moss beneath our boots. We're back at the ridge, where there are claw marks slashed into bark, stained with blood, like warnings no one's willing to say out loud.

Oscar walks ahead of me, eyes sharp, steps careful. Kylie brings up the rear, knife already out, fingers flipping it like she's trying to keep herself entertained. Neither of them speaks. They don't need to. The silence says enough.

I crouch near the tree where we found the markings, brushing aside a clump of wet leaves. Something glints faintly under the debris. Not natural. Definitely not forgotten. I reach in carefully and pull it free.

My stomach knots.

"Is that—?" Oscar steps closer, eyes narrowing.

I nod, holding the object in my palm. What's left of it, anyway. The twisted cord, the cracked stone bead, the shredded leather tie. It used to be a Windrider talisman. The

kind we only gift to kin or blood-sworn allies.

Kylie whistles low. “Well, that’s not ominous at all.”

“It’s not just a threat,” I murmur, fingers tightening around the remnants. “This was deliberate. They wanted someone to find it.”

Oscar kneels beside me. “Do you think it belonged to the scout who went missing?”

“No.” I scan the tree line, heartbeat pulsing hard in my ears. “This one was mine. I gave it to Max Bennett six months ago, when we fought alongside the Ironclaw Pack. I gave it to him before the battle, and later, he said it kept him centered when his wolf was close to snapping.”

“So you told him to keep it?” Oscar asks.

I nod, but say nothing, turning the talisman over in my hands.

“You think he’s dead?” Kylie asks, quiet for once.

I don’t answer. I don’t know how to. The talisman is torn, but it’s not destroyed. The blood dried into its fibers is fresh enough that whoever left it wanted me to know they’d touched it recently. They’re watching. They’re studying us. They’re sending a message.

I rise slowly; the wind brushing against my cheeks, teasing strands of hair across my face. I tuck the talisman into my pocket and look out over the ridge.

“They’re escalating,” I say. “First disappearances, then taunts. Now this.”

Oscar stands beside me, arms crossed. “You think it’s the Crimson Claw?”

Kylie clicks her tongue. “Who else? They’re the only ones freaky enough to make art out of someone else’s pain.”

“Maybe,” I say. “But this doesn’t feel like their usual calling card. This is personal.”

They watch me, waiting for the other shoe to drop, but I don’t say what’s clawing at my insides. That I can feel someone moving just outside of sight. Every hair on my arms is standing on end. That my wolf is pacing just beneath my skin, unsettled in a way she never is—not unless he’s near.

Lucas. Damn it.

Even when he’s not here, his presence lingers like smoke. It’s not just his scent—cedar, pine and heat—but the echo of his voice, the way he says my name like it’s both a warning and a promise. I can’t get him out of my head. And worse? I’m not sure I want to.

Oscar mutters something under his breath and moves toward the next set of tracks, crouching to examine them. Kylie follows, but I stay rooted where I am, staring at the tree where the claw marks dig deepest into the bark.

My fingers brush against the gash. Deep. Clean. Precise.

Not random. A signature.

I close my eyes for a second, letting the forest speak to me—not through sound, but feeling. My people call it wind-sense, the way the earth and air speak when you’re quiet long enough to hear. Right now, everything hums off-key.

Lucas said something’s broken. He was right. But it’s more than that. It’s fractured. Poisoned.

And I can't stop thinking about the way he looked at me the other night, like he could see straight through every defense I've ever built. He's the last wolf I should trust. The last male I should let anywhere near my walls. But I'm not stupid.

Fate doesn't ask for permission-it drags you along in its wake.

I hate that I'm starting to believe it. Hate that when I imagine him walking out of the trees right now, I don't brace for a fight—I brace for impact.

“Hey.” Oscar's voice cuts through the fog. “You okay?”

I nod, turning toward him. “Yeah. Just... thinking.”

Kylie studies me, eyes sharp. “About the talisman, or the Nightshade's beta, who keeps pretending he's not tracking your every move?”

I lift an eyebrow. “You're imagining things.”

“Mmhm.” She twirls her blade. “And I'm a dainty flower.”

Oscar chuckles. “You can flirt with Nightshade's beta later. Right now, we need to figure out what this means.”

He's right. We've got missing wolves, mutilated messages, and an entire region acting like denial is a viable strategy.

Still, as I walk toward the clearing's edge, the talisman burning in my pocket, I can't shake the sense that this message wasn't just for Windriders. It was for me.

They want me rattled. They want me vulnerable. Unfortunately for them, Lucas Stone already beat them to it.

My thoughts splinter as Oscar calls me over. “The tracks split here. One went deeper into the woods—heavy, lumbering gait. The other peeled off toward the western creek. Lighter. Faster.”

“Two targets?” Kylie asks.

“Or a decoy,” I say. “Trying to pull attention in opposite directions.”

Oscar frowns. “What do you want to do?”

I glance between the two paths. “We follow the heavier one. A wounded or mutated shifter would leave that kind of imprint. The lighter steps might just be bait.”

Kylie nods. “That’s the first intelligent thing you’ve said all day.”

I smile sweetly. “Don’t worry, I’m saving my real wisdom for when you need rescuing.”

She winks. “Can’t wait.”

We start down the path, weapons ready, senses stretched thin. Every branch that snaps, every shifting shadow makes my skin prickle. Even so, beneath all of that... my mind drifts back to Lucas—the way he felt under me during training. The way he didn’t flinch when I straddled him just looked up like he was already choosing which sin to commit first. That mouth of his—firm, ruthless, made for snarling commands and kissing ruin into people.

I should hate him. Instead, I’m craving the next moment we collide—and if that isn’t proof that I’ve lost my mind, I don’t know what is.

Kylie slows as the trail steepens, her boots skidding on a patch of loose stone. Oscar

holds out a hand to steady her, but she waves him off. I pause near a large rock formation, scanning the ridgeline. Something's out of place. The sound. The smell. The...

"Stop," I say sharply.

Oscar halts mid-step.

I kneel and press my hand against the ground. Something unearthly scorched the soil here faintly. Not a burn. Not lightning, but heat from within.

Kylie crouches beside me. "What the hell is that?"

I shake my head. "The Crimson Claw's base instinct is destruction. This is methodical. Controlled."

Oscar grunts. "Like someone's testing what they can get away with."

I rise slowly, gaze locked on the tree line.

"You feel that?" I whisper.

The others go still. The forest isn't quiet anymore. It's listening. Watching. Waiting. We're not alone. We back away quietly and seek the relative safety of the Nightshade Pack.

Later, I wind my way along the ridge trail above the compound. It cuts through the forest like a vein, narrow and winding, its edges brushing the drop-off that disappears into the valley below. The air smells of pine needles and smoke from the lodge's distant hearth, but there's something else here, something older beneath the surface. I feel it in the dirt, in the land's pull under my feet.

Isabella walks beside me, silent for a few minutes as we climb. Her presence is calm, a different kind of strength than Lucas or Ryder—less command, more gravity. I like her. She listens before she speaks. She watches everything.

“You’ve been pacing,” she says finally, her voice soft but edged with steel. “In your room. In the hall. Like your skin doesn’t quite fit.”

I glance sideways. “You stalking me now?”

She smiles faintly, pushing a strand of dark hair behind her ear. “No need. You walk like someone being hunted by her own thoughts.”

She’s not wrong. I kick a stone down the slope, watch it bounce off a boulder and vanish into the brush. “It’s difficult to ignore the feeling that something’s coming. Something big.”

Isabella nods slowly. “It is, and it isn’t. The trick is learning which instincts are warning you—and which are dragging you back into old patterns you should’ve broken years ago.”

We reach the overlook, a flat stretch of rock that juts out past the tree line. The view is stunning—layers of evergreen fading into mist, the lodge a small shadow tucked into the ridge behind us. She folds her arms and leans against a moss-covered outcrop, her eyes scanning the horizon like she’s reading more than the terrain.

“I didn’t believe in fated mates,” she says.

I blink. “Seriously?”

“Seriously.” Her gaze stays forward. “Keep in mind I knew nothing about shifters. When I heard about it, I thought it was just some fairytale designed to keep she-

wolves obedient and hopeful. Some biology-meets-romance nonsense that didn't hold up in the real world."

"But Ryder?—"

"I didn't want him," she cuts in. "Not at first. I fought it. I told myself it was a coincidence. That I was just drawn to his prowess in bed, not something deeper."

I grin as I watch her closely, crossing my arms. "And now?"

She looks at me with a sly grin. "Now I know better."

The wind rushes past us, tugging at my braid. I don't answer right away, because I don't want to admit how much her words hit me square in the chest.

Lucas is a pain in my ass. He's cold and sharp and entirely too used to people falling in line. But I've never wanted to rip someone's clothes off and punch them in the face in the same breath. No one has ever kissed me like that—like a claim of ownership, like I was about to be conquered, and I liked it.

"It makes little sense," I mutter. "He and I... we're built for different lives. He believes in territory, control, structure. I don't even like staying in the same zip code for more than a month."

Isabella shrugs. "Maybe that's the point. Balance doesn't come from finding someone who mirrors you. It comes from the one who can challenge your shadow without being swallowed by it—a counterweight, if you will."

That's bothersome; I stare down at the valley, my pulse thudding at the base of my throat.

“Have you told him?” she asks.

I snort. “Lucas? Please. He’d either laugh or have a heart attack.”

Isabella steps away from the rock, brushing her hands on her jeans. “Maybe. Or maybe he’d stop pretending he hasn’t already felt it.”

I shoot her a look. “You sound awfully confident.”

“Lucas might act like he believes in nothing and that life is just one big joke, but he’s not stupid. He knows something’s happening between you.” She hesitates, then adds, “Just be careful. The more you ignore it, the more it’ll control you.”

I want to argue. I want to tell her she’s wrong, that I have it under control. But the memory of his mouth on mine, the way he touched me like I belonged under his hands, steals the words before they form.

I nod instead. It’s the best I can do.

It’s past midnight when I head outside again. Restless. The lodge and other buildings are dark except for a few lanterns flickering near the main entrance. Fog blankets the woods beyond the training grounds, and the air tastes metallic, like ozone before lightning.

Lucas steps out from behind the tool shed like he’s been waiting for me.

“Couldn’t sleep either?” he asks, voice low.

I shake my head. “The forest is too quiet—almost like it’s holding its breath.”

He nods once, and we fall into step together, walking the perimeter like we’re both

pretending we're not here for the same reason.

Then we see it—the deer lies just beyond the tree line, its body contorted, legs twisted at unnatural angles. Something tore it open along the flank—deep gashes clawed through muscle and bone. What's worse, the eyes are gone. Hollowed.

Lucas crouches beside the carcass, jaw tight. "Same markings as the scouts."

"It's a warning," I whisper. "And it's too damn close to the lodge."

He looks up at me, golden eyes flashing. "We're going after it."

I nod, pulse jumping. "Together?"

"You up for that, Windrider?"

"Try to keep up, Stone."

He grins—not the charming kind. The kind that promises we're not stopping until something bleeds.

In one smooth motion, Lucas strips out of his clothing—unbothered by his nudity—stuffing his clothing into a duffle bag he had with him. A low growl vibrates in Lucas's chest, and then the surrounding air crackles. Mist curls at his feet, swirling upward in threads of lightning and shards of deep, storm-lit color. Thunder rolls low through the trees, not from the sky—but from him. The mist surges, swallowing him whole in a sudden flash, and when it clears, the man is gone.

In his place stands a massive wolf—dark gray, broad-shouldered, his eyes sharp and burning gold. Power hums off him, quiet and coiled, the forest seeming to bend around his presence. My heart stutters in my chest. He's beautiful. And dangerous.

And mine, whether or not I want to admit it.

I drop, kick off my boots and remove my clothing, stuffing it into the bag as well before calling on the storm in my blood. The wind wraps around me like a promise, and I let go.

The shift hits me hard—like falling into lightning. The wind rises around me as the storm inside answers my call. Mist coils at my feet, laced with lightning, and flickers of silver and violet. It wraps around me, a living current, and then thunder splits the air. When the mist dissolves, I'm no longer standing on two feet.

I'm a wolf. Four paws grounded to the earth, muscles primed, silver coat gleaming under the moonlight. Ready.

Lucas howls once, short and sharp. A command. I answer with a growl, already surging forward, my wolf aching to hunt. He picks up the bag, holding it in his teeth, and takes off. We move fast, weaving through trees like we've done it together a hundred times. No words. No second-guessing. Just instinct. Just chase.

The scent trail is thick and twisted, laced with rot and something chemical. Not natural. Not right. Lucas leads, moving fluidly and aggressively, cutting through the underbrush as if born to do so. I run beside him, our wolves synced in pace, breath, purpose.

A shadow darts ahead—too fast for a normal shifter. It moves like it doesn't obey the same rules of physics we do. I catch a flash of crimson eyes through the fog.

We found it. Or maybe... it wanted us to.

I give chase, picking up speed, Lucas matching me stride for stride. Somewhere inside me, buried beneath the adrenaline and sharp pine air, a thought flickers like fire

licking dry tinder: whatever this is, it may only be beginning.

CHAPTER 7

LUCAS

The ground tears beneath my paws as I run, every stride a promise. The silver flash beside me is Sophia—quick, fearless, all instinct and muscle. The thing we’re chasing darts ahead, a blur of movement too fast, too wrong. It doesn’t smell like anything natural. Chemical rot, bile, scorched fur. It’s not just a mutant. It’s something else entirely.

We push harder, breath syncing, the woods falling away behind us. The scent trail leads us up a narrow ridge and down again, slicing through a hollow where the earth is dark and waterlogged. The path veers toward a place I’d hoped I’d never need to see again—the cabin.

It slouches in the trees like it’s rotting from the inside out—just the way we left it after Ryder, Isabella, and I fought those mutated freaks from Crimson Claw. I slow near the tree line, watching the shadows coil around the sagging roof. The scent we’ve been following thickens here, clinging to the ground and walls like mold.

I drop the bag and step into the clearing, signaling Sophia to circle left. She flanks me immediately, silent and sharp. When I’m sure there’s nothing lying in wait to ambush us, I let the power rise through me. The wind picks up, mist swirling at my feet. Lightning crackles through it as it climbs up my body and then thunder rolls deep in my chest.

When the mist clears, I’m standing in human form, naked but grounded. I pull on the

boots, jeans and shirt I packed and sling the duffle over my shoulder as Sophia shifts beside me.

Mist coils tight around her, streaked with violet and silver. Thunder hums low as her form vanishes into the stormlight. When it clears, she stands—naked, breathtaking, and utterly unbothered by it.

“Staring’s a good way to get surprised,” she says, plucking her clothes from the bag and tugging on a slouchy sweater.

“Hard not to look when you practically dare me to,” I mutter, dragging my gaze back to the cabin.

“Consider it a stress test,” she says, pulling on the rest of her clothes. “You failed.”

I almost grin, but the stench of blood and sulfur curdles in my nostrils. I push open the splintered door. Inside, it’s worse than I remember. We step inside. The place is cold, darker than it should be. Sophia slams the door shut behind us, and the sound echoes through the dead space like a gunshot. The fireplace is empty, but soot stains the walls like something burned too hot, too fast. Blood is everywhere. Spattered across the floorboards, smeared on the wall. But no bodies.

“No bodies,” Sophia says aloud, echoing my thought. She steps inside, eyes scanning, careful not to touch anything. “They bled out fast. And not from natural wounds. Look at the spray patterns—arterial.”

“Do I even want to know how you know that?”

She grins. “Probably not.”

I nod, crouching near the hearth. Something heavy landed on the stone beneath it,

cracking it. Or something fought to stay down.

The walls are worse. Symbols cover the cabin's interior, drawn in long, jagged strokes. Some in ash, others in blood that's turned rust-brown with time. But some are fresher. Still tacky. They weren't here the last time I was.

Sophia walks toward the far wall, lips parting. "I know these."

I straighten. "Explain."

"They're Windrider glyphs. Old ones. Forbidden," she says, tracing a symbol with a gloved finger but not touching it. "This one means breach. This one—" she hesitates, pointing to a crescent inside a broken circle "—means transformation without unity. It's a warning."

I stare at her. "Transformation without unity. What the hell does that mean?"

"It means something's taken the shifter's natural process and broken it apart. Body without mind. Mind without soul. The kind of change that leaves you stuck between."

"Something mutated, like mutants."

She nods once, sharp and sure. "Exactly like them."

My stomach clenches. I don't scare easily. I've seen more blood than most wolves do in a lifetime. But this? This is different. This is intentional. Someone's trying to force a new kind of transformation—something designed to sever a shifter from their humanity.

Sophia turns toward me. Beneath the light filtering through the boarded window, her pale face shows a jaw set like steel. "We need to tell Ryder. And your regional

council. They won't like hearing it, but..."

"They'll ignore it," I say flatly. "Blackwood's already dismissing this as Crimson Claw being a minor irritant. He won't believe it until they're at his door."

Sophia crosses her arms. "Then we go around him. You're the beta. You have authority."

"I have limits," I growl. "Ryder would back me, but the rest of the council still sees me as the younger Stone with something to prove."

"Then prove it," she snaps. "Or what the hell are we doing out here?"

She moves toward me, quick, eyes blazing. Her scent wraps around me—stormlight, wildflowers, heat. My wolf prowls beneath my skin, responding to her challenge like she's prey worth chasing.

"You think I haven't?" I demand. "You think I haven't bled for this territory? For these wolves? You have no idea what I've sacrificed to keep this region from ripping itself apart."

She stops inches from me. "Then stop pretending you're still in your brother's shadow. Step the fuck into the role you were born for. You're not some rookie pup. You're Lucas Stone. Act like it."

My hand shoots out, wrapping around the back of her neck. Her breath catches, but she doesn't pull away. Her chin lifts, and her eyes spark with fury and something else.

Desire.

“You don’t get to push me like that,” I say low.

She presses closer. “I just did.”

My grip tightens, just enough to remind her who’s in control. I could kiss her. I want to. Her mouth is right there, parted, waiting. But the blood on the floor beneath us, the stench in the air—it claws at my focus.

“We don’t have time for this,” I growl, letting her go and stepping back.

She doesn’t follow, but her eyes stay locked on mine. “You’re right. But don’t think for one second I’m finished with you.”

I believe her. God help me, I want to finish what we started.

I turn back to the wall, eyes catching on another symbol—this one different. A handprint, larger than it should be. Four scratches—like a wolf paw—elongated. Burned into the plaster, not drawn.

Sophia sees it too. “That’s not Windrider.”

“No,” I say quietly. “That’s Crimson Claw.”

Her voice is sharp now. “But mutated. Look at the spread. The claws.”

We stare at it together, the smell of ash and blood curling around us like smoke from a dying fire.

“They’re not just changing,” she whispers. “They’re evolving.”

I nod once. “And from what we’ve learned so far, someone’s helping them do it.”

The cabin creaks above us, something in the rafters shifting. Not a sound of danger, but decay. Whatever happened here is done—but it left an imprint. A warning.

I glance at Sophia again. She's still tense but controlled. Fire and ice under pressure. She'll hold.

"We get back. We regroup. And then we tear this wide open," I say.

Sophia nods, but her voice is quiet when she speaks. "You felt it, didn't you? When we were hunting. The way we moved. The pull."

I don't lie to her. "Yeah."

She doesn't smile. She just looks at me like she knows exactly what I'm refusing to say out loud.

"I can't believe you didn't tell me this place existed until now."

I drop the duffel with a thud near the hearth. "Wasn't exactly keeping it secret, McKenna. I didn't think we'd be back here." I turn, and she's right in front of me again, toe to toe, fire in her every breath.

"You didn't think," she repeats, voice sharp.

"And you never stop talking long enough to listen," I shoot back. "You act like you're the only one who can see what's coming."

She shoves me. Hard. "Because I see it, Lucas. You're too busy playing alpha-lite in your brother's shadow to realize how close we are to losing everything—the Crimson Claw isn't the only threat. The other wolf packs are practically at each other's throats. My people want to pick sides. Other shifters as well. The Cascades are a fucking

tinder box, and I think someone's got a box of matches."

She shoves me again, but I catch her wrist before she pulls away, my grip firm. "Careful, Windrider. You're not in your territory."

Her chin lifts defiantly, that wild gleam in her eyes growing sharper. "I don't have a fucking territory. I'm Windrider, remember?"

The air between us crackles. My wolf growls, pacing the corners of my mind. Sophia's pulse is visible in her throat, but she doesn't flinch. She never does. That's the problem. That's why I want her.

"You keep pushing," I growl, closing the gap between us, "and eventually, you're not going to like where that gets you."

"Then take your best shot, Stone," she hisses, shoving me again. "I'm tired of pretending this doesn't matter."

I don't think. I move. My mouth crashes against hers, and she responds like she's been waiting for it—teeth, tongue, nails digging into my shoulders. I spin her, pressing her back to the nearest wall. She kisses like she fights—all heat and bite, like she needs to prove she can survive it.

I break away just enough to yank her sweater over her head, and she rips my shirt down the center without blinking. Her bare skin hits mine like a brand.

"You want to fight?" I growl, dragging my mouth down her neck, biting hard at the curve of her shoulder. "You want me to prove you can't just walk through my life and leave it unchanged?"

Her hands go to my fly. "I want you to stop pretending you don't already belong in

mine.”

I haul her off the wall and toss her over my shoulder, determined not to give into my lust. I stride out of the cabin and into the forest, finding a small, soft moss-covered clearing just beyond. The air outside is cool, but she’s burning in my arms, squirming free of her leggings, pulling at my jeans with equal fire. I pin her wrists above her head, grinding my hips against hers, my cock thick and aching between us.

Her breath catches as I lower my head to her chest. I take her nipple into my mouth, slow and deliberate, suckling until she arches into me, whispering my name like a prayer that ends in a curse.

"I will not be gentle," I declare, my voice a feral growl. With one hand, I roughly free myself while the other forcefully pins her beneath me. "Not this time."

"I don't remember asking for gentleness," she retorts, her eyes blazing with a challenging fire. "Just know that I give as fiercely as I receive." Her legs wrap around me like a constrictor, dragging me closer as I hastily undo my fly. My cock finds her molten heat like a missile locked onto its target, and I plunge into her with a single, electrifying thrust. She gasps sharply, the sound blending with the feverish rustle of our movements, yet her eyes never leave mine, even as her fingers tangle desperately in my hair and her hips rise eagerly to meet my forceful rhythm.

We crash into a primal cadence swiftly—not frenzied, not rushed. Just deep, deliberate, and charged with every unvoiced desire that crackles in the air between us. She pulls me down, capturing my lips with a hunger that seems intent on devouring my very breath, moaning gutturally into my mouth as I thrust deeper. I pin her hands to the ground beside her head, our fingers interlocked, refusing to shatter the intense connection of our locked gazes.

"Mine," I growl against the tender skin of her throat, my voice a raw, possessive

snarl.

"Yours," she breathes out with a fiery whisper, her hips surging to meet each powerful, deliberate thrust of my body against hers. "And you're mine."

I pound into her with relentless force and burning intensity. Each thrust more feral than the last.

I reach my climax with a profound, primal growl against her skin, buried as deeply inside her as possible. She quivers beneath me, her body convulsing around mine, releasing a sound that is a mix of my name and an urgent plea I can't fully decipher.

For what feels like an eternity, we remain entwined—bodies interlocked, breath gradually tapering into a gentle, shared rhythm. I gingerly shift my weight, sliding off her, only to pull her tightly against me. Her skin is slick with perspiration, and her breath is a warm, soothing caress against my chest.

Neither of us speak. There's no need. Something's different now. The argument, the chase, the fire—it burned through whatever flimsy denial we'd been clinging to. But that doesn't mean either of us is ready to say it aloud.

Her fingers draw slow circles over my stomach. "That thing we felt in the woods... it wasn't just adrenaline."

I nod. "I know."

"And this..." She hesitates. "This changes nothing."

I glance down at her. "Only if you fight it."

She doesn't reply, but the way she curls into me says more than words ever could.

I kiss the top of her head, then ease away, pulling my jeans back on and reaching for the duffel. “I want to check inside to make sure we didn’t miss anything.”

I move back to the cabin and enter. Sophia follows. The scent of blood still lingers, sharp and acidic. I need to clear my head before the reality of what we found here slips away.

That’s when I see it... tucked into the corner of the hearth, barely visible beneath a collapsed floorboard, something glints. I move the broken slats aside and pull it free—a photograph, crumpled but intact.

The image stops my breath. It’s not a pack photo. Not wolves. It’s human—five people, dressed in sterile white. Scientists. One of them stands out. A man in a lab coat, tall, pale, with narrow eyes and a familiar scowl. He doesn’t belong in this forest. He doesn’t belong in any world I know.

But he matches the description of someone Isabella told me about once. A name that showed up in Arthur’s stolen records, in half-burned pages among Arthur’s notes. Dr. Everett Cain.

And behind him, barely visible through the glass of what looks like a reinforced holding cell, is an enormous wolf, but somewhat misshapen, twisted. Watching.

Sophia kneels beside me, eyes locking onto the image.

“But where did they come from?” she whispers.

“Unknown, but it looks like they’re mutating wolves—creating some type of superior species.”

She glances at the symbols on the wall.

“What?” I ask, my jaw set.

“That fits with what we found—the symbols, but what if the wolves they’re using aren’t from this plane of existence?”

“Huh? Explain.”

“There are legends about wolves and other shifters that were pushed into a pocket of the world that lies beneath the surface. Tales about miners digging too deep, about dragons pushing something from our world...”

“Fairytale...”

“To you, maybe. But to Windriders? Not so much. We feel like the earth is becoming poisoned, or something is bleeding into our world, and that it needs healing... This ‘poison’... could be linked to the declining birthrates.”

“Do you believe it?” I ask.

“Do you have a better explanation?”

I don’t.

Sophia’s eyes meet mine, and I see it there—whatever the Crimson Claw is or isn’t, it’s not of this world, and somebody is trying to use that to capitalize on it, but to what end?

CHAPTER 8

SOPHIA

We enter the general meeting room of the Nightshade Pack as Elder Blackwood's voice cuts through the lodge's great hall like a blade made of bureaucracy and barely concealed disdain.

"The Windriders have overstepped," he says, standing tall in his pristine charcoal jacket, every silver hair in place, eyes like frost. "Not just with Nightshade. They've involved themselves with Ironclaw affairs." Then, realizing Lucas and I have joined them, he points a bony finger at me and continues, "And I hear rumors you've been poking around in the territories of several other packs that fall under our governance as well. This is not a matter that the Windriders should involve themselves in. You are outcasts."

Lucas doesn't flinch. He stands beside me, a fortress of calm fury, but I can feel the storm gathering inside him. We're not exactly touching, but I swear the heat radiating from his body could burn straight through my sweater.

I don't bother looking at Blackwood when I speak. I'm watching Ryder instead, because he's the only one in this room who actually understands what's at stake.

"We didn't interfere, and anything that affects the wolf packs along the ring of fire concerns us. We were guardians of this land long before some of our kind splintered off and founded their packs and territories," I say calmly. "It has always been our way to help those who need it regardless of their pack affiliation. For example, Lucas

and I tracked a kill—the senseless death and mutilation of a deer. We followed something we saw running away to a cabin filled with Crimson Claw symbols and a hell of a lot of blood. No bodies, just glyphs burned into the walls and evidence that something unnatural is being enhanced or created.”

“And you think it gives you the right to act as judge and executioner on another pack’s land?” Blackwood fires back.

“They didn’t execute anyone,” said Lucas in my defense. “We invited three of the Windriders to stay here as both Ryder and I believe they may know more about this than we know.” He holds up his hand to hold off the accusation that we’ve been hiding something. “I don’t think they even know what they know... any more than we do.”

I smile. “Lucas is right, and for what it’s worth, I believe this gives the Windriders and the Nightshade Pack the right to not sit on our hands while people go missing,” I shoot back, my voice sharper now. “I know Max Bennett. I fought alongside him a few months back. I gifted him with a talisman we found under a clump of wet leaves. Max knew the significance of my giving it to him; he would never have removed it. Someone left it there. Do you think that’s coincidence?”

Blackwood narrows his eyes. “There’s no proof Max is?—”

“He’s missing,” Ryder cuts in, his voice low but final. The room stills around his words. “Went off-patrol near the Ironclaw border three nights ago. Didn’t report back. His last check-in put him less than ten miles from one of the same marked trees Sophia and her people found.”

That gets everyone’s attention.

Kylie leans against the wall to my left, flipping her knife over her fingers with casual

precision. She doesn't speak, but she doesn't need to. The barely contained energy in her stance says she's about three seconds from daring Blackwood to draw a line in the sand.

"Is this regional now?" she asks flatly. "Or do we need more bodies before it counts as everyone's problem?"

Ryder sighs and runs a hand through his hair. "I'm not ignoring the signs. But we're on thin ice politically, and the other elders?—"

"We don't have time to play nice with the elders," I say. "Whatever's behind the Crimson Claw is spreading. These aren't random attacks anymore. It's a message. A pattern."

Lucas speaks again, and his voice is all iron. "They're escalating. Whoever's behind this is directing them, maybe even enhancing them. We found signs it's being done deliberately. Not just Crimson Claw tactics—this is something else."

Blackwood snorts. "Mutations? What's next, vampires? Aliens? Shifters from another plane of existence?"

Lucas doesn't blink. "Wouldn't be the weirdest thing I've seen."

That shuts Blackwood up for a beat. Then he straightens, brushing imaginary lint from his sleeve.

"You've made your position clear," he says to Ryder. "But understand this—your beta and his... guest... are now under direct observation. One more unauthorized excursion, and I'll make sure the council intervenes."

With that, he turns and strides out, his entourage trailing behind him like overfed

shadows.

Ryder waits until the door shuts before he turns to us, jaw set. “I agree with you. But Lucas, you’re pushing the line. And Sophia—if you get pulled into this politically, I won’t be able to shield you.”

I nod. “I didn’t come here looking for a shield.”

“No,” Ryder says, gaze flicking between us. “But maybe you should start thinking about what it means if you’re not just passing through.”

He walks off without waiting for a response.

Kylie whistles low. “Well, that was a whole pile of fun. I vote we get the hell out of this lodge before someone tries to assign us homework.”

I grab my jacket and meet her by the door. “Shadow Hollow?”

She grins. “God, yes. Let’s go see if we can’t rattle a cage or two.”

The trip to Shadow Hollow takes less than an hour, but the surrounding forest feels older than time. The trees here aren’t just tall—they loom. The air carries the sharp tang of copper and moss, and even the wind feels like it’s got secrets it doesn’t want to share.

Marjorie lives at the edge of Shadow Hollow in a charming little cottage with more wards hanging from the porch than I’ve ever seen in one place. Bones, feathers, twisted bits of silver wire—all humming with latent power. The place crackles with magic, wild and unfiltered.

“I thought I might see you again,” she says, stepping aside. “Must be serious.”

Kylie lifts an eyebrow. “Is it the constant threat of death? The undead forest? Or the fact that something in a lab coat might be birthing monsters in our backyard? Yeah. It’s serious.”

Marjorie grunts and gestures us inside.

She pours tea—no sugar, no questions—and waits until I’ve taken a sip before she speaks.

“You want answers about the mutants and about what’s being done to wolves who don’t come back whole.”

I nod. “We’ve got fragments. But we need names.”

She studies me for a long moment. Then she leans forward and says quietly, “Dr. Everett Cain.”

The name lands like a punch.

Marjorie continues, voice lower now. “He was a geneticist. Human. Brilliant. Cold. Obsessed with evolution. He visited our old vet, Arthur Whitfield, Isabella’s mentor. He believed shifters were proof of an ancient genetic anomaly. He thought he could ‘enhance’ it.”

“And the Crimson Claw?” I ask.

She gives a sharp shake of her head. “They’re a tool. Not the architect. Cain believed the future of humanity was hybrid. Controlled. He lost his license after a whistleblower leaked he was performing experiments which had no scientific value and were torturous to the animals involved. He disappeared after that. Last rumors had him heading east, toward Ash Creek.”

Kylie frowns. “Why Ash Creek?”

“There are places on this earth where the veil is thinner,” Marjorie says, eyes distant. “Where things from other realms can bleed through. Ash Creek is one of them. It always has been.

My fingers tighten on my cup. “Other realms.”

Marjorie looks at me. “What you Windriders call the Deep Below. The rest of us just pray we never see it.”

I lean forward. “So what’s Cain doing now? Opening doors?”

“No,” she says. “He’s not opening them. He’s using what came through them.”

That cold thread of dread slides down my spine again. The same feeling I had when I saw the handprint burned into the cabin wall.

“You think he’s breeding monsters?” Kylie asks.

“I think,” Marjorie says carefully, “he’s creating something that doesn’t belong in this world. And he’s not working alone.”

My pulse stutters. “Who?”

She doesn’t answer. Instead, she stands, walks to a cluttered shelf, and pulls down a leather-bound book older than anyone alive should own. She flips it open to a page filled with Windrider glyphs—like the ones on the cabin walls.

“This is what you’re dealing with,” she says. “Not war. Not politics. A rewriting of nature.”

The air in the room shifts. Kylie's foot taps once, slow and thoughtful.

"Okay," she says. "So... road trip to Ash Creek?"

I grin despite the storm in my gut. "Oh, hell yes."

I pocket the image of the glyphs, thank Marjorie, and step back outside. The sky's gone slate gray, and something in the wind hums like a warning.

Lucas is waiting at the lodge. He needs to hear this.

Cain's name is more than just a lead. It's a match dropped onto already smoldering kindling. And if we don't figure out what kind of fire we're dealing with soon... we may all burn.

By the time Kylie and I make it back to the lodge, dusk has swallowed the mountains. Shadows stretch long across the courtyard, and a sharp wind snakes through the pines, carrying the bite of something older than winter.

Lucas is waiting by the training ring, arms crossed, jaw tight. I can tell the second he sees me that something's off. His eyes—those predatory eyes—narrow as he pushes off the fence and crosses to me in three purposeful strides.

"Where the hell have you been?" His voice is low and sharp, not loud—but dangerous in the way that makes my wolf perk up.

"We went to see Marjorie," I say, brushing past him. "You said you wanted answers."

"I said I wanted us to move together," he bites out. "Not have you disappear off the map and leave me scrambling when Blackwood comes sniffing around again."

“I can handle Blackwood.”

He grabs my wrist—not hard, but firm enough to stop me. “It’s not Blackwood I’m worried about. You keep acting like the Windriders are still a solo act, but you’re not. Not anymore.”

Kylie’s already halfway up the steps to the lodge, clearly deciding this is one argument she’s not getting in the middle of. Probably smart.

I meet Lucas’s gaze head-on. “Don’t pull the mate card right now.”

His jaw clenches. “That’s not what I’m doing.”

I lower my voice. “Then stop acting like I’m yours to manage.”

His eyes flick over my face. The air charged between us. He doesn’t release my wrist. Doesn’t step back. “You’re not mine to manage,” he says evenly. “But I’ll be damned if I stand here and watch you get yourself killed because you think needing backup makes you weak.”

We stand there a beat too long, breaths uneven, the air thick with everything we’re not saying.

Finally, I tug my hand free. “Marjorie gave us a name.”

Lucas’s eyes narrow. “Go on.”

“Dr. Everett Cain. Former geneticist. Obsessed with shifters. Hybridization. He’s off-grid, possibly near Ash Creek.”

Lucas straightens. “Ash Creek?” His whole body stills in that predatory way he has

when he senses danger—or prey. “That’s practically on the fault line. If he’s doing experiments near there...”

“Then he’s not just playing with biology. He’s tapping into something deeper.”

Lucas mutters a curse under his breath, heading up the stairs to the lodge. “We need to bring this to Ryder. Now.”

But I hesitate, because something else happened on the way back. Something I haven’t told him.

The wind called me. Not literally—not at first. But as soon as we crossed the pass, I felt it coil in my gut like a whisper waiting to unfurl. I’d only ever felt it once before—years ago, during the Rite of Passage, when the elders placed the Windwoven tether into my spirit.

It’s how Windriders reach out across distances, across bloodlines. A sacred bond that only kin or the alpha of the Windriders can invoke... my father.

I excuse myself and step away under the guise of needing air. Once I’m alone near the edge of the training grounds, I drop to my knees and press my palms into the earth. The wind stirs immediately, circling me like it recognizes something in my pulse.

“Show me.”

The wind answers—not in words, but in memory.

I’m suddenly not in the Nightshade territory anymore. I’m back in the canyon where the elders marked my skin with storm-oil and braided the wind into my spine. A flicker of heat pulses against my chest, and I know he’s here—my father.

The air bends, and his voice slips through like smoke over stone.

“You found Cain.”

“I found his name. Marjorie confirmed he was real. And close.”

“Then you need to stop. Now.”

The words hit like a slap. I sit back on my heels, the connection humming in my ears.

“Why? You’ve always taught me to follow the truth wherever it led.”

“Not to the threshold of things better left buried.”

“We think he’s experimenting on mutants. Enhancing them, and we think they’ve come up from the Deep Below. There may be a crack, and it may still be open...”

“I know what he’s doing. And I’m telling you to stay away.”

His voice carries no anger, just finality.

But I don’t back down. “If you know, then tell me why. Tell me why I’m supposed to abandon this when wolves are going missing. When something is bleeding into our world, possibly poisoning the earth, which could affect the birthrate.”

There’s a long pause, and then... “Because Cain used to work for someone I thought was long dead. A human we once trusted. He betrayed us. He opened the door.”

“What door?” I ask, heart pounding.

“The one that our kind sealed during the War of Mists. The one that should never

have been open again.”

My breath catches. The War of Mists isn’t just a myth—it’s one of the oldest, most closely guarded Windrider histories. A tale of another realm bleeding into this one. Creatures that didn’t belong in sunlight or shadow. And a gate closed with blood and sacrifice.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because once you know, you can’t unknow. And if Cain finds you, he won’t kill you. He’ll use you.”

The connection begins to falter.

Then he’s gone. The wind falls silent.

I sit back, hands numb against the soil, stomach tight. My father has never ordered me to stand down before. Never invoked the Windwoven bond with that kind of force, which means he’s terrified.

But fear doesn’t change what’s happening. It doesn’t bring Max back. It doesn’t stop Cain. And it sure as hell doesn’t stop the voice in my gut telling me I was meant to find this.

I rise, brushing dirt from my knees, and make my way back toward the lodge. Lucas is standing on the porch now, talking with Ryder. His eyes find mine across the clearing, sharp and sure, and I know instantly—he’d follow me if I asked. He’d burn the world down if I said the word, which is exactly why I can’t take him with me.

This isn’t his burden. Not yet. I nod casually and slip back to my room.

I have packed my bag by the time the moon rises. Light. Essentials only. I leave a note—just two lines:

Had to follow the wind. Don't come after me.

—S

I step outside into the stillness. The wolves are quiet tonight. Even the trees feel like they're watching. I head for the eastern ridge, where the path curves down toward Ash Creek. My boots are silent against the rock. My breath is steady. The farther I walk, the more the wind rises.

CHAPTER 9

LUCAS

As my eyes take in her note, a deep stillness settles over me, yet turmoil brews beneath the surface.

Had to follow the wind. Don't come after me.

Does Sophia truly think that a few hastily written words can keep me away? After everything we've faced side by side, everything we know, the intense emotions that have bound us together? That is complete and utter bullshit. There's a small part of me that thinks I should respect her wishes, but another part is pulling me to chase after her, knowing I can't let go so easily.

Ryder's still at the lodge, half-talking with Isabella, but he sees the shift in my expression and strides over. "What happened?"

I hold out the note. His eyes scan it fast. His jaw tightens.

"She went to Ash Creek. Alone," I say.

Isabella curses under her breath. Ryder scrubs a hand down his face. "How long has she been gone?"

I don't answer. I'm already moving. I storm through the lodge, down the corridor to my room, grabbing my field pack, tactical gear and a spare gun. I don't stop to

change. I don't eat. I just run. Out the door, through the courtyard, across the training field.

The wind tears across the ridge as I tighten the field pack against my chest, cinching the straps until they bite into my palms. Everything I need is inside—clothes, water, an extra clip of ammo in a comms bead just in case she's stupid enough to have brought one and hasn't turned it on.

She didn't leave a trail so much as a damn flare. Only a note that says 'Had to follow the wind. Don't come after me.' Yeah, like that was going to work.

I crouch low beside the tree line, nose to the dirt, fingers sifting through crushed pine needles and broken brush. The ground is soft here. She was moving fast, but not recklessly. Her prints are clean. Even in her anger and frustration, she's calculated. My jaw tightens.

A low growl hums in my chest as I rise to my feet. The scent of her curls around me—wildflowers, lightning, stubborn pride. I roll my neck, tilting my head toward the dark horizon. She's heading southeast, toward Ash Creek. Of all the reckless, dangerous, suicidal... I stop myself before the thought finishes. No. I don't get to rage at her yet. Not until I have her in front of me.

I step back from the trail and drag in a slow breath. The storm building inside me is clawing for release. My wolf presses hard beneath my skin, impatient, coiled, wild. I can't track her on foot and keep my head at the same time. I need my wolf—the hunter.

My boots hit the dirt with a thud as I strip, one layer at a time—jacket, shirt, jeans. I roll them quickly, stuffing the bundle into the side pocket of the field pack. I leave the bag where I'll be able to pick it up easily with my teeth. It's not ideal, running like this with extra weight, but I'll be faster than any vehicle.

Faster than fear.

The shift crashes through me like lightning hitting dry forest. Mist curls up from the ground, drawn to my skin like it remembers the shape of me. Shards of blue and gray whip through the air as the storm pulls tight. Thunder answers, not from the sky—but from inside my chest. The wind howls and the earth cracks beneath my knees. A surge of lightning and fire, mist curling like a cyclone around my form. Then in the blink of an eye, the storm clears, and I stand on four legs, fur thick and dark as smoke, muscles coiled beneath my hide, breath steady and deep.

The world sharpens instantly. The forest isn't quiet—it's alive. I can hear the rustle of wings high in the trees, the scurry of a fox three ridges down. But all I care about is the scent trail that punches through the air like the heat of a wildfire.

Sophia.

Her path cuts east, weaving through narrow rock passes and creek beds, following ridges only someone born to the wind would dare. Typical. She never picks the easy way. I pick up the pack. My paws dig into the dirt, and I move—fast and low, slipping between trees and across stone without a sound.

The pack is a weight I barely register. What I do register is the rapid beat of my heart and the way my mind keeps flicking between what I'll say when I find her... and what I'll do.

She ran from me. Again. After everything. After what we've said. What we've done. Outside the cabin—our bodies tangled together, her mouth on mine, her hands dragging me in like she wanted to keep me buried inside her until she forgot her own name.

And now she's gone. Out here alone. Tracking a madman whose idea of science

involves torturing shifters and cracking holes in the veil between worlds.

I leap over a fallen log, landing in a low crouch, nose to the ground. Her scent is still strong, but it's shifting—saltier now, like sweat and adrenaline. She's pushing herself hard. Good. Maybe she's finally afraid.

The wind changes direction and her scent hits me harder—closer now. Less than two miles. I push harder, muscles burning. My mind races with everything I want to tell her. That she's reckless. Brilliant. Infuriating. Mine. That if she dies before I see her again, I'll burn every inch of Ash Creek to the ground just to drag her ghost back and yell at it.

And maybe I'll kiss her so hard she forgets how to argue, or maybe I'll pin her against the next wall and remind her she is mine.

Branches slap against my fur, snapping behind me. I don't slow. The closer I get, the more the scent changes. Something else is in the air now—sterile, chemical, metallic. My lip curls. I recognize the same stench from the cabin. Cain's work.

I hit a clearing and skid to a stop, dirt spraying in a wide arc. Ahead, through a veil of fog and underbrush, I catch a glint of old glass. A building—half-collapsed, brick bones showing through decades of ivy and rot. The old Cain estate.

And right there in front of it, crouched low behind a boulder with her dagger in hand and her braid whipping in the wind, is Sophia. The scent trail is faint, but it's there—wildflowers and ozone. Hers.

The ground drops into a ravine, but I don't slow. I leap, but it wasn't clean. It wasn't right.

I stagger for a breath. Too fast. Too much.

Something's wrong. Not with me. With the land.

The wind tastes like rust. The air's too still. The closer I get to Ash Creek, the more the world feels... off. Unnatural.

I run faster.

Sophia's scent pulls me forward, curling through the pine and ash. The old estate is barely a structure anymore—a rotting husk swallowed by time and forest. Moss-covered stone, collapsed walls, a wrought-iron fence half-buried in dead leaves.

She's standing outside the rusted gate. Her back is straight, arms folded, but I can see the way her fingers twitch near her blade. Her head turns just slightly when she hears me.

I shift, the mist curling around me again, this time steadier. Controlled. When it clears, I step from the trees, fully clothed thanks to the spare pack strapped to my flank.

"You disobeyed me," I say flatly.

Sophia doesn't flinch. "Disobeyed you? I wasn't aware I owed you my obedience."

I close the distance between us quickly until we're toe-to-toe. "You left me a damn note," I growl low. "You knew I'd follow."

"As I recall, I didn't ask you to."

"You think I care?"

Her jaw clenches. "Lucas..."

I grab her arm, just enough pressure to make her look at me. "You don't go dark on me again. If you need to run off and play Windrider warrior's solo mission, you damn well take me with you."

"Kind of defeats the whole concept of a solo mission, don't you think?" she quips before tilting her head and studying me for a long beat. Then her voice drops. "But you came."

I let her go. "Of course I came."

We stand in the quiet a moment longer, then she turns back toward the estate.

"This is it," she says. "The Cain estate. Or what's left of it."

We pass through the broken gate together, moving silently over cracked stone. The front of the estate has collapsed, but the east wing remains partially intact, overgrown with vines and rot. Every step we take feels heavier. Like the land itself is warning us back.

I draw my blade. Sophia mirrors me. Guns are fine in their place, but their noisy and knives work better for close fighting. And if a dragon shows up? Well, guns don't work all that well either.

We enter through a side door; the hinges groaning in protest. Inside, the air is stale, metallic. Debris fills the main hall—shattered glass, remnants of machines, broken tile. But it's what lies deeper inside that turns my stomach.

The lab.

We find it in the east wing, behind what used to be a bookcase. A hidden room, long and narrow.

Tanks. Empty now, but their walls are coated in slime. Some still hold bones, scraps of fur, claws that never belonged to any species I recognize.

Syringes. Dozens of them. Some labeled. Some not. One marked with the Windrider glyph for the bond . Another marked “ hybrid series 3B .”

Sophia crouches near one of the tables, brushing dust from a yellowed folder.

"He was cataloging them," she whispers. "Cross-referencing genetics, matching them to lunar cycles, elemental readings. There's Windrider script in here... Cain was working with someone who knew our ways."

I grit my teeth. "Your father?"

She looks up sharply. "No. He warned me away from this. Practically ordered me to stay out..."

“Practically?” I quip.

She grins. “He said Cain worked for someone who opened the door."

I nod slowly. "So he's not just experimenting. He's implementing."

“Yes. Someone opened a door during the War of Mists, and it seems Cain wants it wide open again."

She moves to the far wall, where jars line a rusted shelf. Most of the jars are shattered. One remains intact. She lifts it carefully. Inside, suspended in some kind of fluid, is a fetus. Small. Wolf-shaped. But wrong. Too many joints. Double rows of teeth.

Sophia goes still. "They're breeding them."

I take the jar from her and set it down slowly. "No. They were breeding them. Now they're releasing them."

Her eyes meet mine, wide. "This is why the land feels off. It's not just energy. It's corruption. Like something is leeching the balance from the earth."

I step in closer. Her pulse flutters. She doesn't step back. "You still think I should've stayed behind?"

"No," I admit. "But next time you vanish, I'll tie you to the damn bed."

Her lips twitch. "Kinky."

"Deadly serious."

She nods. "Good. So am I."

SOPHIA

I press my hand against a cold metal table. The slab bears a stain of something that looks like blood but smells like antiseptic and something darker—like rot baked under glass. The tanks lining the back wall are tall, reinforced, and long-abandoned, but they still hold residue, faint traces of whatever was once inside them. Lucas steps past me, jaw locked, golden eyes scanning every corner of the room.

"You recognize any of this?" he asks, voice low but sharp.

"Some," I answer, voice unsteady. "Not the tech... but the symbols etched into the metal." I move toward the nearest tank, brush away a layer of grime. "That one's

Windrider. Corrupted, though. Twisted.”

Lucas turns, moving toward me in two silent strides. “Corrupted how?”

I trace the symbol with my fingertip—not touching it, just hovering close enough to feel the pull. “This one’s supposed to mean ‘threshold.’ It’s used in rites when you’re about to cross into a new phase. But here...” I nod toward the jagged lines branching off it, scorched into the metal like claw marks. “Someone added fracture runes. Like they wanted to break the threshold—not just cross it.”

Lucas mutters a curse and kicks a broken syringe across the floor. “This place feels like a tomb.”

“No,” I say. “A breeding ground. For monsters and mutants.”

He stops moving. His eyes meet mine. “You shouldn’t have come here alone.”

I laugh, but it sounds hollow. “You think I don’t know that? But I didn’t have a choice. The wind led me.”

“I would’ve come with you. I would’ve backed your play.”

I want to tell him I know. I want to say I believe him. But the truth is harder to choke down than I expected.

Instead, I kneel near a collapsed desk and start rifling through the rusted drawers. Most of it is useless—molded paper, broken clamps, what looks like the spine of some small creature, shriveled and curled in on itself. I pick up a bloodstained folder and straighten slowly.

Lucas is watching me. Not the room. Not the shadows. Me.

“What?” I ask, folding the folder under one arm.

“You’ve got that look again,” he says.

“What look?”

“The one you had the first time we met. Like you’re five seconds from bolting and thirty seconds from breaking.”

I flinch. Then I laugh—because he’s not wrong, and because pretending I’m fine is easier than admitting I’m unraveling at the seams.

“I’m scared, Lucas.”

The words come out before I can stop them. My voice is quieter now. Not a whisper, but not loud enough to echo in this godforsaken building, either. Just truth, laid bare like cracked porcelain.

“I’m scared of Cain. I’m scared of what we’re going to find next. I’m scared that whatever’s coming is going to tear through the world before we can stop it. And...” I hesitate. The hard part isn’t admitting the fear. It’s the second part. The part that makes my throat tighten.

“I’m scared of you,” I whisper.

Lucas doesn’t move. His hands stay loose at his sides, but his whole body is alert, tuned to me like he can sense the tremble beneath the words.

“Because of what I am?” he asks. “Because I’m dominant? Dangerous?”

I shake my head. “No. Because when I’m near you, I don’t feel like running. I feel

like staying. And I've never... I don't know what to do with that."

He crosses the distance between us slowly, like approaching a wounded animal. Or maybe a wildfire. His hand rises, knuckles brushing my cheekbone.

"Me too," he says.

Two words. Simple. Honest. And somehow, they crack something in me that even the wind can't repair.

He touches my face, his thumb sweeping beneath my eye, and I lean into him without thinking. He doesn't kiss me—not this time. He just presses his forehead to mine and stands there, letting silence do the talking.

I close my eyes and breathe him in. Earth. Storm. Something uniquely Lucas.

The quiet between us is a balm, and maybe that's why I almost miss it—the faint hiss. The air shifts. My eyes snap open. Lucas jerks his head up, too. We spin at the same time, eyes searching the ceiling, the corners, the seams of the walls.

"What is that?" I whisper.

"Trap," he growls. "It's a fucking trap."

A vent in the ceiling releases another hiss, this one louder, urgent. A pale gas begins to pour into the room from the ducts above, slow and swirling like mist with teeth.

Lucas grabs my arm, dragging me toward the door. "Move!"

We stumble through the lab's main corridor, but every exit slams shut before we can reach it. Metal doors seal with a mechanical clang, one by one. My vision's already

going spotty. Gas. Hallucinogenic? Paralytic?

I don't know. I don't get the chance to ask.

Lucas pounds against the final door, snarling in frustration. "Sophia—stay with me."

I'm trying. I swear I am. But my limbs are heavy, like they belong to someone else. My knees buckle. He catches me before I hit the ground. His arms wrap around me, hauling me against his chest.

"Breathe slowly," he says. "I've got you. Just—fuck, just hold on."

I blink up at him, but his face is swimming now, blurred at the edges like I'm staring through water. His body tenses beneath me—not a shift, not yet—but the power in him coils tight, like it's straining against the edge. I can feel his wolf clawing for control, pulsing beneath his skin, but Lucas holds the line, jaw clenched, eyes wild with the effort.

"Don't pass out," he growls, but his voice is warping. Slurred.

He's going under too. I try to say his name. Try to fight the pull. But everything is fading, and the last thing I hear before the dark takes me is the sound of Lucas snarling, the echo of my name on his lips.

And then—silence.

CHAPTER 10

SOPHIA

The first thing I register is pain. It slides through me like a knife drawn slow—dull at the edges but no less cutting. My limbs are heavy. My mouth tastes like copper and ash. I blink against a harsh, flickering light overhead. A buzzing fluorescent fixture. Cold floor beneath me. Stone? No, metal. Too smooth. Too uniform.

Where the hell am I?

I roll onto my side with a groan, pressing a hand to my head. The air smells of bleach and iron. Beneath that, something foul and sickly sweet—chemical. I push myself upright, bracing against the wall. It's smooth. Seamless. The same metal as the floor. There's no door. Not one I can see. Just a thick pane of glass in one corner—opaque from this side.

A cell.

The realization lands hard.

Memories slam into me—Lucas, the lab, the gas. His voice calling my name as the room spun sideways. His arms wrapped around me. The way his body trembled, power pulsing through his skin, his wolf just beneath.

I spin toward the glass, panic rising. "Lucas!" No response. I press my hand flat to the glass. "Lucas, answer me!"

A muffled thud echoes from the other side of the wall. Then a second. And a voice, rough and furious. "I'm here."

Relief crashes into me so fast I stagger. I press my forehead to the glass. "Are you okay?"

"No." His voice is tight. Controlled. Which means he's absolutely not okay. "Where are we?"

"Underground," I say, looking around the cell. "A facility. It must be beneath the estate. Hidden."

I hear him pacing, heavy footfalls back and forth. Then a slam—his fist, probably—against his own wall. "The Crimson Claw patrols outside. I caught a scent just before I came to. We're surrounded."

"They took our weapons."

"Of course they did."

I glance up. The ceiling's just as seamless as the rest of the room. No vents. No obvious cameras. But they're watching. I can feel it.

Something scratches softly to my left. I turn fast. There's another cell beside mine. The glass in that one isn't fully opaque. I squint, heart hammering. A body.

No—movement. Slow. Jerky. A man, crouched low, back to the wall. He's muttering under his breath. His hair is long and matted. He's thin—too thin—but something about the set of his shoulders sparks recognition.

"Lucas," I call softly, "someone's in the next cell."

His voice sharpens. "Who?"

I press my face to the glass, willing my eyes to adjust to the shadows. The man moves, just enough for me to catch a glimpse of his face.

And my breath stops.

"It's Max. Max Bennett."

A pause. Then: "You're sure?"

"Positive. But he's... different."

Lucas swears. Loud. Unfiltered. "Is he injured?"

"Not that I can see. But he's not all there. He's talking to himself. Pacing. Repeating things. Like he's stuck in a loop."

Max's voice rises suddenly, a rasping chant: "Can't bleed silver. Can't bleed silver. Can't..."

Lucas growls. "They experimented on him."

I kneel near the glass separating Max's cell from mine. "Max," I say softly. "It's Sophia. Max, can you hear me?"

He stops. Just for a second. His head tilts. Then he smiles, too wide, too slow.

"The stormwalker. You followed the wind. I told them you would."

My blood runs cold. "Who did you tell, Max?"

But he just laughs and slams his head once against the wall. Then again.

"Lucas, Max has been exposed to something. We need to get out of here. Now. And we need to take him with us."

"We don't know what they did to him. He might be dangerous."

I laugh. Max is one of the Ironclaw Pack's most formidable warriors. On his worst day, half dead, he was dangerous.

"It doesn't matter. I won't leave without him." I can hear scrambling around coming from Lucas' cell. "Lucas?"

Lucas doesn't answer right away.

"Lucas?" I call again.

"I can't shift," he says finally.

The words hang there between us.

"What?"

"I tried. Three times. The first felt wrong. The second... something cracked inside. Like I was being ripped in two."

Panic ripples through me. Lucas is one of the strongest wolves I've ever known. If he can't shift from man to wolf or wolf to man... something is very wrong.

"They did something," he says. "To us. To the air, maybe. Or something in our systems. I feel my wolf, but he's trapped. Like he's bound and there's a wall between

us."

I close my eyes. Think. Focus.

I'm a Windrider. We don't just fight storms. We listen to them. We belong to them. And right now, the wind is still speaking to me—soft, low, like a forgotten current beneath the world.

I press both palms to the wall.

"Sophia? Are you all right? What are you doing?" Lucas asks.

"Listening."

"To what?"

"To the storm."

He doesn't argue. Just waits.

The Windwoven bond hums inside me, old and quiet. I call to it—not in words, but in memory. The canyon. The rites. The day the elders placed the storm in my bones. I remember the taste of lightning on my tongue, the feeling of becoming more than blood and muscle.

I push deeper. Past the pain. Past the fear. The metal under my hands thrums. Not much. But enough. A weak point. Not in the wall itself—but in the frequency. A flaw in the design.

"I think I can break it," I whisper.

"You think, or you know?" Lucas's voice is sharp.

"Does it matter?"

He huffs. "No. Do it."

I inhale sharply, drawing in the tempest with a fierce determination—not with raw power, but with the sheer force of memory and the relentless beat of my pulse that calls the storm. Within me, the bond ignites like wildfire, a deep primal connection, and the wind answers with a ferocious eagerness. It rages through me—swift and precise, eternal, a force both untamed and intimately known.

The sturdy walls stand firm, defiant, but the glass is not so lucky. A fragile hairline fracture races across its surface, a subtle yet glaring sign of impending doom. Another line follows, a chaotic web of cracks spreading like wildfire. The air reverberates with the high-pitched shriek of pressure finally succumbing, the glass bending and straining under the relentless, invisible weight of the storm.

Max howls from the other cell. Lucas slams his hand against his own wall. "Do it again. Harder."

I unleash a primal scream—not born of fear, but as an unstoppable force—and the storm erupts with savage ferocity. Lightning crackles violently in the air, illuminating nothing but chaos, while the wind's relentless howl echoes through the unseen sky. The power of the Windwoven surges through me with the force of a tsunami slamming into jagged cliffs, and the glass around me shatters outward in a dazzling explosion of razor-sharp shards. I collapse to my knees, breathless and quaking, my heart thundering in the aftermath of the untamed power that ripped through my very being.

Lucas is through the wall in seconds, hauling me up.

"Can you walk?"

"Yes."

His grip tightens. "Then run."

Behind us, Max begins to laugh again. "You won't make it far. He sees you now."

"That's nice. He can see you too, and you're coming with us," I say.

"Sophia..."

"I'm not leaving him here."

Max faces me. His eyes are glowing faintly. Not wolf. Not human. Something in between, and for a moment, I can see through to the warrior he was before.

Lucas and I start to move, but Max doesn't. I walk toward him, reaching out. He flinches. "Come back Max. Come back. We need to go." I flex my fingers, beckoning to him. "Please."

I don't remember running. I don't remember standing. I just remember the sound of Lucas breathing hard next to me, Max groaning in the corner, and the metal of the cell door groaning open like it's dying a slow death.

The Windwoven left me drained. My skin's too hot, my hands tingling from the storm I pulled through the ground. But it worked. We're out of those cells, and whatever the hell they used to suppress Lucas's wolf appears to be weakening.

The hallway outside is narrow, carved from old stone, with crude wiring stapled along the ceiling. It smells like piss, bleach, and decay. One long corridor lit by

humming fluorescents, and far too many doors that promise things I don't want to see.

Lucas catches my arm, pulls me behind him with a look that brooks no argument.

"I'm fine," I whisper, yanking my arm back. "You lead, but don't treat me like I'm breakable."

He doesn't argue. Just nods once and hands me the blade he took off the wall in the control room. He nods to Max. "Don't fall behind."

Max returns the nod. Perhaps he, too, can come all the way back.

I grin at Lucas, despite the fact that my legs feel like wet paper. "That'll never happen."

Max stumbles as we move, his steps uneven. I slide under his arm and let him lean on me. He reeks of sweat and old blood, but his eyes are clearer than before. Still wild, but tracking.

"You remember me?" I ask.

He nods slowly. "Windrider. Silver braid."

"That's Kylie."

Max looks confused, but continues to move. "Knife-thrower. Talked shit to an Ironclaw general during a treaty meal."

I laugh. "Again, that's Kylie. But glad to know we made an impression."

His mouth twitches. “Has she stabbed anyone yet?”

“Not today that I know of, but that can change at any time.”

Lucas throws a hand up, stopping us short. He listens—then points to a junction ahead. Two guards. Crimson Claw. Their scent is unmistakable. One has the scent we’ve come to expect, the other has the normal scent, plus something different—probably enhanced, like the ones we fought in the forest.

Lucas turns to me. “You take the one on the right.”

I blink. “You’re trusting me with the loud one?”

He doesn’t even glance at me. “I’ve seen what you do when you’re angry. I trust that more than I trust silence.”

A smile tugs at my mouth. Not now, not here, but later? I’m going to make him say that again.

He crouches, then launches. No more talk.

The fight is fast and brutal. The wolf is strong—bigger than most, faster than I expect—but not stronger than Lucas. He slams into the Crimson Claw operative mid-lunge, and the impact sends both of them crashing into the stone wall with a crack that echoes down the hall. I hear bones snap. Maybe Lucas’s. Definitely the wolf’s.

The second one sees me and lunges, jaws wide, claws raking through the air. No blade. Doesn’t need one.

I drop into a low roll, his claws grazing my shoulder as I slide beneath him. My knife flashes, slicing the back of his hind leg clean. He stumbles with a howl, skidding

across the stone. Before he can recover, I'm already moving—on him, under him, past his fangs.

My blade drives straight into the soft spot just below his jaw. He jerks, claws scrabbling against the floor, trying to catch purchase.

He lets out a wet, broken whine.

“Too late,” I whisper.

I twist the blade and feel the body go still.

Lucas growls low, the sound vibrating through the corridor. The Crimson Claw wolf falls silent beneath him, a heap of fur and cracked ribs. Lucas' fight ends in a pile of broken limbs and blood-slick stone. He steps back, chest heaving, one arm bleeding but still holding his blade like he plans to use it again.

“You good?” he asks.

I nod and turn toward Max. He's slumped against the wall, panting, but he gives me a weak thumbs-up.

Blood pools on the floor. We keep moving.

Lucas grabs the radio from the guard's belt and smashes it. “That'll buy us two minutes. Maybe.”

We move again. The tunnels begin to climb; the stone giving way to packed dirt, then metal. I can smell the outside world—pine and damp moss, clean air seeping in through the cracks. We're close.

Then I hear it—boots.

Lucas hears it too. He motions for me to duck behind a rusted panel. He yanks Max with him, keeping him pressed low while I tuck into the shadowed edge near the base of a half-collapsed stairwell.

Three more guards.

Lucas growls low, more sound than voice. “We don’t fight unless we have to. We draw them in, split them, and you take Max. Get him out.”

“Lucas—”

“I’ll find you. If I don’t?—”

“Don’t finish that sentence.”

He grips the back of my neck, just for a second. Grounding. Then he’s gone, slipping into the darkness like a predator who’s finally remembered what he is.

The first guard goes down with a sound that’s more crack than scream. The second turns—and I’m already moving, Max dragging his legs beside me as we sprint for the door Lucas just cleared. The third chases.

I don’t stop. I shove the next door open—blinding daylight. I blink once, then we’re out.

Max falls to his knees the second we’re clear of the estate, retching into the brush. I drop beside him, blade still in hand, body shaking with adrenaline.

Then Lucas is there, storming out of the trees with blood on his knuckles and fury in

his eyes.

He crouches beside me, eyes scanning my face, my body, checking for injuries I don't have time to process.

"Are you hit?" he asks.

"No."

"Max?"

"Alive," Max rasps, coughing up bile. "Barely. Thank you."

Lucas grabs him under the arms and hauls him to his feet like he weighs nothing.

"We move. Now."

We don't stop. Not when the howls rise behind us. Not when we hear reinforcements pour into the ruins. We run.

At the edge of the ruined estate, the morning air cuts sharp against my skin, thick with ash, old blood, and the distant howl of something still hunting. We've pushed hard to get this far, but we're not out of the woods. Not yet.

Lucas glances back once to make sure we're alone, then drops the pack beside a cluster of half-buried stones. "We run from here."

I nod and start peeling off the borrowed shirt, the fabric sticking to the dried blood on my ribs. Every bruise, every scrape screams in protest, but I keep moving. Lucas is already unbuckling his belt, movements quick and efficient. No hesitation. No modesty. Just a soldier stripping for war.

Max grunts behind us as he tugs off the oversized hoodie we found in Cain's bunker. He's weaker than both of us, but there's a steel in him that didn't break under Cain's experiments. That means something. He strips slower, wincing as he steps out of his pants, one leg stiff with a healing fracture, but he doesn't stop. Doesn't complain.

Lucas crouches by the pack and rolls each of our clothes tight, stuffing them in with practiced hands. "Keep close. If you fall behind, I'll drag your ass the rest of the way."

He says it to Max, but his eyes sweep over me as well. He means both of us.

The wind picks up, carrying pine and frost through the trees, and my wolf stirs under my skin, restless. Ready.

Lucas steps back, his body already thrumming with power. The mist answers him first, curling low around his feet, streaked with gray and blue. Thunder rolls deep and low as lightning threads through the fog, swallowing him whole in a sudden, electrified surge. When the storm peels away, the man is gone.

In his place stands a massive wolf, broad-shouldered and coal-dark, eyes glowing gold in the moonlight.

I drop to one knee, pressing my palm to the dirt. The wind comes fast this time, as if it's been waiting. It wraps around me like a command, pulling at my skin, dragging the storm from deep inside my chest. Mist slithers up my arms, silver streaked with violet, and then it breaks with a single bolt of light.

And I am wolf. Silver-coated. Breath steady. Muscles primed.

Max stumbles as the shift takes him—less graceful, more pain—but he lands on all fours, panting, his wolf form lean and marked with old scars. Tired, but still standing.

Lucas lets out one sharp bark. A signal as he picks up the pack with our clothes.

We run.

It takes hours, and every step back toward the lodge feels like dragging fire through my bones, but we make it. Just outside the compound, we shift back, pulling on our clothes. The second we step through the gates, wolves flood the yard—guards, scouts, even some of the Nightshade elite. I see Isabella. I see Kylie. But it's Ryder who steps forward first.

He takes one look at us—bloodied, bruised, clothes torn, faces drawn tight with the kind of pain that doesn't fade quickly—and says the last thing I expect.

“Kylie reached out to your father. We need to talk,” Ryder says. His voice is quiet, but sharp enough to cut steel. “All of us.”

Lucas guides Max gently onto the stairs and straightens. His posture is relaxed, but I know that look in his eyes. It's the calm before something dangerous.

“Kylie, can you look after Max?” I ask.

“Take him down to the infirmary. Ask them to make sure he's okay.”

Kylie nods, and I turn back to Ryder. “Talk about what?”

Ryder doesn't blink. “Everything. Cain. The Deep Below. The mutants. Your wind. My beta. What happens next.”

Behind him, someone closes the lodge door slowly. Just like that, I know. We're not done, and it's going to be a long night.

CHAPTER 11

LUCAS

“ You look like hell,” Ryder says as I drop into the seat across from him. His tone is flat, but his eyes are tracking everything—my torn shirt, the dried blood at my collar, the subtle tremor in my right knee. I can’t stop it, not yet. Not until I know what the hell is happening to me.

Sophia takes the seat beside me without asking, legs crossed, arms folded. She doesn’t say a word, but her presence is sharp as a blade at my back. Solid. Unflinching.

She came for Cain, but she stayed for me. Whether or not she admits it.

Isabella closes the lodge door behind her and locks it, a subtle click that silences the room. Only four of us are here now—Ryder, Isabella, Sophia, and me. The Nightshade inner circle doesn’t include anyone else tonight. Not with what we’re about to say.

“What the hell happened out there?” Ryder asks.

I meet his gaze. “You’re going to want to sit down for this.”

He’s already sitting. Doesn’t flinch. Just gestures for me to begin.

“We tracked Cain to the ruins near Ash Creek. He’s not just hiding—he’s building.

Or experimenting. Possibly both. There was an underground facility beneath the estate, reinforced. Steel, not stone. Hidden chambers with suppressed energy signatures. The whole place was designed to stay off any known magical or elemental grid.”

Ryder leans forward, forearms braced on the table. “What was inside?”

Sophia clears her throat. “Cells. Three that we saw. Both of ours... and one holding Max Bennett.”

Ryder’s face tightens. “The Ironclaw warrior? That was him?”

I nod. “Barely. He’s not the same...”

“Is the pack safe with him?” asks Ryder.

“Absolutely,” responds Sophia. “He’ll be with Kylie, and that will soothe him. Besides, I saw improvement from when we took him out of there and got here.”

“Sophia’s right. We ran into some of the Crimson Claw. Max didn’t hesitate and he didn’t lose control, but they did something to him. Prolonged exposure to whatever energy Cain’s working with. Maybe something more.”

Sophia lifts the folder we took from the lab and places it on the table. “This was in Cain’s private cache. Genetic schematics. Biological notes. Not just hybrids but attempts to combine elemental bloodlines with synthetic augmentation. Half of its Windrider script, but corrupted. He’s trying to blend Windwoven power with something else.”

“Blood rites,” I add. “The ritualistic kind. The kind that disappeared after the War of Mists.

Ryder looks at me. “And the gate?”

I nod. “We found the threshold glyph. Etched into a control panel. Reinforced with fracture runes. He’s not just opening a door. He’s trying to tear the wall down.”

Ryder stiffens. His jaw ticks once. But he says nothing.

Sophia watches him, narrowing her eyes. “Max said something in the cell. Just before we got out.”

Ryder’s attention snaps to her. “What?”

She doesn’t flinch. “He said, ‘He sees you now.’”

Isabella goes still. Ryder looks between us like he’s calculating what to say, what to bury. The silence stretches.

I break it. “You know what he meant.”

A long beat. Then Ryder sits back, running a hand through his hair. “According to Sophia’s father, Cain worked with the regional council years ago. Quietly. Supposedly as a consultant on shifter bloodlines—tracking fertility issues, mapping behavioral patterns. But he went rogue. Started asking questions about shifter origins, about ancient rites. When the Windriders cast out one of their own, he followed her.”

Sophia’s voice is quiet, but it cuts. “What was her name?”

“Lina.”

The name lands like a fist to the chest. Sophia stiffens beside me.

“They exiled Lina before I was born,” she says slowly. “The stories say she tried to weaponize the Windwoven bond. That she wanted to bind the storm to blood, not spirit.”

“She succeeded,” Ryder says. “Briefly. Before they cast her out, she left fragments of her research behind. Cain found them. Maybe they found each other. But whatever he’s doing now... it’s not science anymore. It’s religion.”

“You should’ve told us,” I say. “Back in the beginning.”

Ryder’s gaze hardens. “You think I haven’t been fighting to keep this from spreading for years? I had nothing but rumors. Nothing actionable. Now I do, and it’s not like you Windriders were exactly forthcoming with information.”

I growl at him—he doesn’t get to speak to Sophia that way. Ryder starts to say something, but Isabella places a restraining hand on his leg. He reaches down, takes her hand in his and brings it to his lips. My brother adores his mate.

He turns back to me fully, voice sharper. “Effective immediately, you’re the lead on the Cain operation. But this isn’t just your mission, Lucas. The council’s watching. You’ve got two weeks. Bring them proof—real, undeniable evidence that Cain is behind the breach and the mutations.”

“And if I don’t?” I ask.

“Then the council takes it out of our hands. And you know what that means.”

Mass burn. Blanket sanctions. Regional lockdowns.

I nod once. “Understood.”

Sophia doesn't look at me, but I feel her focus shift.

We leave the meeting with more questions than answers, but no time for anything soft between us. Not yet. Not with what's coming.

Night has faded to a gray dawn when I finally make my way to the infirmary wing where Max is recovering. Kylie dozes on another infirmary bed. He's lucid enough now to walk, to drink water. Not enough for a debrief. Not yet. He's wrapped in a blanket, bare-chested, cuts still scabbing over across his ribs. His eyes track me as I enter. Sharp. Wary. The wolf is still there.

He nods. "Stone."

"Max." I grab the chair, turn it backward, and sit. "I wish I could give you time, but I don't think we have it." Max nods. "I need you to tell me everything you remember."

Max's fingers twitch against the edge of the blanket. "They kept the lights on all the time. No windows. The gas... it eats at the wolf. Pushes it down. But not all the way. Just enough that you feel him screaming but can't help him."

My stomach knots. "And Cain?"

Max's jaw clenches. "He doesn't care about us. Not the wolves. Not the bloodlines. He cares about what's beneath."

I lean in. "The gate?"

"He's not just trying to open it," Max says, voice rough. "He's trying to feed it."

"Feed it what?"

Max's eyes flick to mine. "Us."

The words sit heavy in the air between us. I press a hand against my knee to stop it from shaking. "How?"

"Doesn't matter how," Max rasps. "He's not opening a door to escape. He's summoning what's on the other side."

"Hasn't he already done that with the Crimson Claw?"

Shaking his head, Max says, "Only partly. There are things in the Deep Below far worse than the Crimson Claw and they are voracious."

I stand, heart pounding. "Rest. We'll talk again soon."

Max grabs my wrist as I turn away. "Don't let her go back there," he says, nodding toward Sophia.

It's not a request. It's a warning.

After I ensure Sophie is back in her room—Kylie refuses to leave Max—I find myself pacing in my room. I decide to go for a run. I think about taking Sophie, but when I stick my head in her door, she's curled up on the bed, sound asleep. I decide to let her rest—the incident at the Cain estate was far more taxing on her than it was on me.

The trails east of Nightshade territory cut through thickets of pine and moss-choked ravines. The air is colder here. Cleaner. More primal, less human. I strip out of my clothes at the tree line and crouch, digging my fingers into the earth before I let the storm take me.

The mist hits hard. Not like before. This time, it resists. It wraps around me in fits and starts—patches of blue and gray flickering like bad wiring. Thunder rumbles, but distant. Off-key. The energy snaps at my bones, but not cleanly. Still, I fall into the storm, and when the mist clears, I land on four legs.

For three seconds, I'm whole. Then the ground lurches beneath me, and pain rips through my side. Not physical. Not even magical. Just... wrong.

My wolf snarls, stumbles, then retreats into the darkest corner of my mind. I collapse, naked and shaking, barely able to breathe. Something's breaking in me, and I'm not convinced I'll survive it.

The training ring is lit only by moonlight and the flickering glow spilling from the lodge windows. The gravel crunches faintly under my boots as I step closer, but she doesn't turn. She's too focused. I watch her move—deliberate, fierce. Every slash of her blade is clean. Sharp. Controlled. It's the fifth time I've seen her run this exact drill, and every pass through, she pushes harder. Like she's fighting something only she can see.

I stay just inside the fence, arms crossed, jaw set. I could call out. I don't. She knows I'm here. She felt me the moment I crossed onto the field. I'm not exactly subtle when I want to be seen.

She finishes the sequence, knife tucked against her thigh, her chest rising fast. She turns, and there it is—that fire in her eyes, bright as ever. The sweat slicking her skin catches the moonlight. Her shirt clings to her torso, and for a heartbeat, all I can think about is the way she looked under me in that cabin. Wild. Honest. Mine.

“Couldn't sleep?” she asks, dragging the back of her arm across her forehead.

“You're bleeding.” I nod to the thin line of red along her forearm.

She glances down. Doesn't even flinch. "It's nothing."

My jaw tightens. "You're pushing too hard."

"Funny. I was about to say the same to you."

I step forward. Close enough to feel the heat rolling off her skin. Her muscles are taut. She's strung tight, vibrating like a wire about to snap.

"You think this is a game?" I ask.

She lets out a bitter little laugh. "No. I think it's life. One we're both barely holding together."

Her words hit harder than I want them to. And I hate that she's right.

"You almost died in that lab," I say.

"So did you."

"I wasn't the one who ran off alone to begin with or invoked some supernatural force."

She grabs a towel from the bench and wipes her hands, like we're talking about the weather. "We already had this fight."

"Apparently not loud enough."

The towel slips from her fingers. She turns fast, her expression sharp. "Don't talk to me about control, Lucas. You can't even hold your wolf together right now. And I'm supposed to sit here and listen to lectures about recklessness?"

I bite back a snarl. “You think I don’t know something’s wrong? You think I don’t feel it every damn time I try to call him and either nothing happens... or something weird?”

She steps closer, toe to toe now. “Then stop trying to control me just because you can’t control yourself.”

Silence stretches between us like a live wire. I could walk away. Should walk away. I don’t. Instead, I grab her. My hands close around her arms, firm, grounding, and I pull her closer before she can blink. Her eyes flare, but she doesn’t shove me off. She never does.

“You think I want control?” I say, voice low. “I want you safe. That’s not the same thing.”

She presses into me, chest to chest. “And you think the only way I’m safe is if I do what you say?”

“I think you don’t understand what’s at stake.”

“I do. I just don’t let it break me.”

“You’re breaking,” I bite out. “You’re just too damn proud to admit it.”

Her hands grip my shirt with a fierce intensity, yanking me toward her with an unrelenting, almost brutal force. “You don’t get to tell me who I am,” she spits, her voice crackling with defiance and raw challenge.

I respond with a low, dangerous growl that vibrates with barely contained fury. “Oh, really? Then maybe I’ll show you.”

In one swift, savage motion, I shove her back against the coarse, splintered wood of the ring's wall—not enough to hurt, but sufficient to remind her of the electric, burning power surging between us. Her breath catches, but the fire in her eyes isn't one of fear—it's a blazing storm of passion and barely suppressed rage. Her grip on my shirt tightens, pulling me toward her with an urgency equally fierce. I claim her mouth with a relentless intensity, and she meets me with a ferocity that suggests she's been waiting for this collision of souls all night.

Her taste explodes on my tongue—a potent mix of sweat, salt, and raw, unrefined fury. I kiss her with an all-consuming passion, desperate to draw out the tempest that lives within her, and she responds in kind, our exchange igniting in a furious blaze, sharp and explosive, like a wildfire tearing through dry fields.

Without a moment's hesitation, her legs coil around my waist, her ankles locking securely behind me as I lift her with determined ease. Her panting grows ragged, punctuated by fierce nips at my neck as she begs me to plunge even deeper into this maelstrom of desire. One hand anchors her weight against my body, while the other wrestles with her pants, tearing them down with a single-minded intensity, heedless of anything but the raw need pulsing between us.

"Say it," I command, my voice a guttural declaration against her flushed skin—a demand that is both a plea and a command. "Say you want me."

"I've never stopped," she gasps, her confession a wild blend of challenge and surrender.

That is all the fire I need. I yank my jeans down just enough to unleash my fully engorged cock. She's already slick with anticipation—ripe and ready. She's perfectly primed as I drive into her with a brutal, unyielding force—a mutual groan erupting from us, loud, unrestrained, primal.

She is exquisite in her tightness, burning hot, the sense of belonging we've both craved so desperately. I thrust hard, pinning her against the fence with a possessiveness that brooks no denial. She takes every inch, her nails raking into my shoulders, her lips trailing incendiary kisses along my jaw and throat, biting down in rhythm with her moans. Her voice resounds in the enclosed space, a raw, unfiltered cry that fills me with a savage satisfaction.

There is no tenderness here—only pure, unadulterated need. It is a forceful claim, an overwhelming declaration of possession, the culmination of an obsession we've both circled for far too long.

"Mine," I roar into the sensitive curve of her throat, each word a command laced with desperate desire.

"Always," she gasps, her voice a trembling promise of surrender and affirmation.

Her body convulses around mine in a shuddering climax, her back arching as her nails leave blazing trails down my skin. Moments later, with one final, explosive thrust, I surge over the edge, spilling deep within her as a guttural groan escapes us both.

We remain entwined in the charged silence that follows, our breaths intermingling in the heavy aftermath. I press my forehead against hers, my body trembling with the echoes of our ferocity, holding her close—unyielding, unwilling to let go. And for once, she remains wrapped in the intensity of our shared storm.

Later, I wake in her bed. The room is warm, quiet. She's curled beside me, hair scattered across the pillow like silver thread. I could stay here. Pretend, for a few hours, that none of the rest exists.

But I can't. The dream comes for me like fire. I bolt upright, lungs burning, sweat

slicking my chest. The image still scorches behind my eyes—Sophia screaming on the other side of a gate of blinding light. Smoke, fire, the scent of death.

I climb out of bed and pull on my pants, pad barefoot down the hall to my room and out onto the balcony.

The night is chilly. Still. But it doesn't clear my head.

"You saw it too," Ryder says, coming to stand behind me.

I turn. He's holding something—an old book, cracked leather, edges worn with age. He steps forward and offers it.

"Found this in the archives after Cain disappeared the first time," he says. "Didn't understand the markings until Sophia described what you saw."

I open the book. There, on the inside page, is the glyph from the lab. The one carved into Cain's walls. Etched in black ink, surrounded by Windrider runes and something older.

"The glyph," I say, voice tight.

Ryder nods grimly. "We believed the door—the rift to the Deep Below—was sealed. We were wrong."

I glance toward Sophia's window. The dream slams back into me like a punch to the ribs. I don't say it out loud. But I know. The gate Cain's trying to open isn't just a door. It's a summons, and whatever he's after, it's answered.

CHAPTER 12

SOPHIA

I flip open the journal that Lucas gave me with reverence and dread. The pages are brittle, lined with age, but the ink is still easily legible. A steady, deliberate hand—no flourishes, no sentiment—etched every word. Just purpose.

The Windrider elder who wrote this had seen the War of Mists firsthand. Fought it. Survived it. His entries start like a record—documenting signs of encroachment, elemental imbalances, disappearances. Then it shifts. Or maybe he does. Somewhere around the midpoint, his writing turns frantic. Desperate. Focused entirely on the glyph.

He calls it Kith'Tarn . The Final Sigil. A banishment mark that can burn through flesh and the veil that lies beyond the doorway, keeping the world safe from the Deep Below. Windwoven blood is the only thing that can activate it. But not just any Windwoven. It requires balance—two sources of storm-touched power, anchored in opposite energies.

“One bound to storm, one forged in flame.”

I read that line a dozen times before it hits. He wasn't talking about fire and weather. He meant polarity. Rage and stillness. Lightning and stone. Lucas and I.

I see sketches—sprawling glyphs, patterns of coiled wind, and branching storm paths—filling the page beneath my fingertips. And in the center, a seal marked in

bold strokes. The lines twist as if drawn with agony, not ink. It's not just a glyph—it's a warning. A ward. A weapon.

Cain must have found it. That's what Ryder was afraid of. But Cain's not using it to keep the gate closed. He's trying to invert it—to turn a banishment into a summons.

My pulse kicks faster. If I can unravel the pattern, I might be able to reverse the reversal. Take back control of the sigil. But it wouldn't be as simple as redrawing a few strokes. The glyph was designed to seal something ancient behind a fractured veil. It demands equal sacrifice from both wielders—stormblood from each side. Elemental balance.

If I'm right, Lucas and I would have to give it everything. Not just blood. Power. Essence. Whatever thread ties us to the Windwoven bond would have to be used as a conduit. Once. Maybe only once.

I slam the journal shut, breath sharp in my chest. Across the table, Lucas looks up from the comms bead he's syncing with Ryder.

"You find something?" he asks, voice rough.

I hold up the book. "The glyph. It's not a portal key. It's a banishment seal. One of the last used to close the gate during the War of Mists."

His eyes narrow. "So how the hell is Cain using it to open things?"

"Because he's twisting it. Reworking the balance."

Lucas swears under his breath. "What do you need?"

"Stormblood. Two sources." I look him dead in the eye. "Me. And you."

His brow furrows. “Why me?”

I flip the journal open again, pushing it across the table. “You’re not Windrider, but the storm answers you. The mist bends for you. You’re marked, Lucas. You always have been.”

He stares at the glyph. Then he nods. Once. No hesitation.

“We’ll do it.”

We barely make it out of the war room before an argument erupts downstairs.

Members of various packs have filled the Nightshade lodge. Two packs just arrived from the western range, and already the air is heavy with accusation. Elder Brant, all bristle and bared teeth, is snarling at one of the Windrider emissaries.

“Your people brought this,” Brant says. “It’s your blood in that glyph. Your kind gave Cain what he needed.”

The emissary, Kael, stands tall but unmoved. “Our blood sealed the gate once before. Your packs have ignored the warnings we offered you for years.”

“Enough.” Ryder’s voice cuts through the noise like a blade. “You want to assign blame? Do it after we survive this.”

I step forward. “The glyph isn’t Cain’s creation. He’s using something ancient—something we only half-understand. Fighting each other over scraps won’t stop him.”

Brant scowls. “We should prepare to strike. Hit the neutral territories. Find his operatives and cut them down.”

“And what if you’re wrong?” I ask. “What if you kill wolves who have no part in this?”

Brant shrugs. “Collateral damage.”

Lucas’s voice cuts in, low and deadly. “Try that near our pack and I’ll put you in the dirt myself.”

Brant turns, but the look in Lucas’s eyes kills any retort he was going to make. The elder mutters something and storms off, his assistant in tow.

Kylie appears beside me, flipping her knife between her fingers like she’s been waiting to use it all morning.

“Well, that was productive,” she mutters.

“Ready for a field trip?” I ask, already grabbing my coat.

Her grin is all teeth. “You know I live for cryptic detours into haunted territory.”

We head southeast on horseback—faster than waiting for transport to be cleared. Rolling fog, the kind that clings to skin and seeps into bone, covers the lowlands. The Windrider historian we’re looking for lives on the edge of an abandoned orchard, a wide, sloping property overrun with gnarled trees and storm bells hanging from every branch. The air hums with latent magic. Familiar. Dangerous.

Her name is Karla, and she opens the door before we even knock.

“I felt you coming,” she says, eyes bright. “Stormborn and blade-bonded. Come in.”

The inside of her house is a maze of scrolls, bound skins, and books tied shut with

wire and salt-thread. Kylie immediately finds the liquor shelf and helps herself to a dusty glass of something that smells like pine and melted ice.

“We need to know more about Lina,” I say.

Karla’s face darkens. “Why now?”

“Because she’s not dead.”

That stops her.

“They exiled her,” I continue. “But Cain found her. Or she found him. Either way, they’re working together.”

Karla walks to a shelf and pulls down a scroll, cracked and ancient. She lays it flat on the table. “Lina wasn’t just exiled. People believed her to be destroyed. Her power fractured the bond. She started carving Windwoven sigils into her skin—burning them with iron. She thought if she carried the glyphs in her body, she could control the storm without channeling it. No conduit. Just pain.”

Kylie leans over the scroll. “Did it work?”

“She survived it. Barely.” Karla taps a mark—one I recognize from the glyph in Cain’s lab. “But it broke her. She didn’t believe in balance anymore. Only obedience.”

“And now she’s back,” I say softly. “I saw her.”

They both look at me.

“In a vision,” I add. “While reading one of the older scrolls. She was with Cain. They

were standing at the gate. And her skin... someone had carved it head to toe. The glyphs were black.”

Karla’s face goes pale. “Then she’s not just back. She’s feeding the gate.”

I nod. “And she knows how to open it from the other side.”

Kylie pulls her second blade and tucks it into her boot. “Guess that answers whether we’re going to need more knives.”

I fold the scroll carefully, tuck it under my arm, and stand. “We need to go. If Lina’s this close to finishing the summoning pattern, we’re already behind.”

Karla touches my wrist. “Be careful. Stormblood can seal the gate again—but only if it’s truly balanced. That means sacrifice.”

I nod, throat tight. “I know.”

As we ride back toward the mountains, the wind picks up. Not just a breeze—this is the storm calling. The bond surging beneath the earth.

And in the distance, I swear I feel something respond. Not just the wind. But the gate... it’s waking, and Lina’s going to make damn sure it doesn’t sleep again.

The mist starts low—thin curls of fog trailing across the path like spilled breath—but it moves wrong. Too precise. Too aware.

I rein in my horse with a low whistle. Kylie does the same a few yards ahead, turning in her saddle.

“You feel that?” I ask.

“Yeah. Something’s off.” She flips the safety off the crossbow mounted to her saddle. “People consider the lowlands to be haunted as hell, but that’s different.”

I let the reins go slack, letting my fingers graze the leather pommel of my blade. My pulse isn’t racing, but my skin has that static-tingle feeling like before a lightning strike. The air is too still. The birds are too quiet. I nudge my horse forward, careful. Controlled.

And then I hear it—one breath too many. Just off the trail, buried behind the veil of fog.

I dismount without a word. Kylie doesn’t speak, but I feel her move in the saddle, angling to cover my flank. I walk a few paces into the trees, drawing the blade at my back. The silence thickens like honey, cloying and slow.

Another step... then the crack of a branch—barely audible—but I’m already moving.

I pivot hard and drive my blade toward the source, just as something rushes me from the side. I duck, roll, and land in a crouch.

He’s Crimson Claw, but barely. His body is too thin, too stretched. Like Cain stitched muscle where there should be bone. His eyes glow red in the fog, and his mouth is curled in a snarl, fangs visible even in his half-formed face. He doesn’t speak. Just launches at me again, and I don’t hold back.

The storm answers me before I even call it. It surges from the soles of my feet, drawn through my veins, riding the crackling fury that’s been waiting since I saw Lina’s face in that vision. Mist coils around me, shot through with violet and silver. My fingers twitch, and the air splits with a thunderclap.

Lightning tears down from the sky like it’s tethered to my spine. The force of the

change rips through me—mist and wind crashing through every bone, bending muscle and form into my other self. I hit the ground on four legs, silver fur slick with rain that hasn't fallen yet.

The Crimson Claw doesn't flinch. He comes at me fast—too fast—but I'm faster. I hit him low, taking him down at the ribs. The impact shudders through us both, but I recover first. My jaws clamp around his throat and I drive him into the dirt hard enough to crack roots. He kicks once, twice, then stops moving.

His scent is poison. Old blood, chemicals, something that shouldn't exist. I pull back, heart thundering in my chest.

The ground trembles behind me, and I whip around, but it's just Kylie. She stands a few feet away, casually wiping her blade on a patch of moss. Although her crossbow remains loaded, she doesn't need it now. The fight's over.

"Told you something was off," she says. "That thing looked like it crawled out of Cain's garbage disposal."

I flick an ear.

She walks over and nudges the corpse with her boot. "Next time, can I kill first and ask questions never?"

I drop the form and stand, mist unraveling from my limbs in slow coils. I'm breathing hard. Not from exertion—adrenaline. Something about that scout was different. More distorted. Like Cain is getting bolder with whatever experiments he's running.

"He was watching us," I say, pulling my clothes from the saddle pack. "Tracking us the entire way."

Kylie nods. “Think he saw what we got?”

“Doesn’t matter. He’s not reporting back.”

She grins. “Dibs on the next one.”

We make the rest of the ride in silence. I stay alert, but the forest settles again. Whatever that scout was, he was alone—maybe sent ahead.

Cain knows. And if he didn’t before, he will now. By the time we return to the lodge, the sun has dipped behind the mountain’s ridge. Long shadows stretch across the yard, cast by towering pines and flickering torches. A few guards nod to us as we pass, but no one speaks.

Everyone feels it. The build-up. The storm gathering beyond the edge of what we can see.

Inside, Lucas is waiting by the stairs. He looks me over once—slow, deliberate—and something in his jaw loosens when he sees I’m fine. Not injured. Not bleeding.

He says nothing. He just reaches out, brushes his knuckles down my arm once, and then turns toward the war room, but I don’t follow. Not yet. I need space.

The observatory sits on the third floor of the lodge, overlooking the northeast range. It’s a quiet place. One the younger wolves avoid. Too many books, not enough action—perfect for what I need to do.

I close the door behind me and move to the center of the room. The floor is bare stone, polished smooth from decades of footsteps. I kneel and pull the chalk from my satchel. My fingers are still trembling, but the lines come steady. I’ve drawn this sigil three times today already. In dirt. On paper. Once on my skin.

But this is different. I mark the outer circle first—wide, even, enclosed. Then the threshold glyph. Next, the fracture runes. The banishment lines. I work slowly and precisely until I have replicated the entire seal on the stone below. Then I place my palm over the center and whisper the Windwoven call.

The air goes still. The glyph begins to glow. Faint at first—just a flicker. Like a coal catching light. But it pulses. Once. Twice. A steady rhythm.

Alive!

I press harder, trying to hold the connection. To read the glyph from the inside out, as the Windrider elder must have done all those years ago. And that's when I see it—the reflection in the window beside me. Not the glyph. Not the glow.

But my face. Only—it's not mine. The features are mine but altered. My eyes are darker. My hair is pulled back in a braid that looks too tight. Lines of script running down my cheek like carved lightning. The sigils are familiar. But they're wrong. Twisted. The reflection smiles.

I jerk back so hard I fall onto my side, chalk scattering across the stone. The image vanishes.

I scramble to my knees, heart pounding so loud I can barely hear the wind outside. The glyph is still glowing. Still pulsing. I know what I saw.

It wasn't just a vision. Or a trick of the light. It was her—Lina. She's not just walking the world again. She's watching me... and waiting.

CHAPTER 13

LUCAS

The frost hasn't burned off the ground yet when Max and I hit the southern patrol line. I'm amazed at the Ironclaw warrior's ability to recover from whatever was done to him in that horrible place. The sun's not even up, just a dim glow brushing the mountains behind us, and the air tastes like ash and rain. Something's coming. Every instinct I have says so.

Max doesn't talk much, not anymore. But he walks beside me like a shadow, his gait steadier each day. He still flinches when the wind kicks too hard, and his eyes go distant every time a bird call sounds too close to the frequency of the lab alarms. But when his boots hit the dirt, he's a soldier again. Not whole. But enough.

He pauses at the ridge line, gaze narrowing. "You smell that?"

I nod. Copper and sulfur. Wrongness baked into the bark of the trees ahead. We move in tandem, cutting through a thicket that's thicker than it should be. Brambles snag at my arms. Max pushes ahead, crouching low, and I follow until we reach the edge of the clearing.

The body's there—twisted, like it fell from the sky instead of being torn apart on the ground. Young. One of ours. Barely past his first run as a scout.

My stomach turns. Not just from the wounds—though they're bad. Too clean in some places, too savage in others—but because of what's carved into the tree above him.

The Nightshade crest, inverted. The lines are the same. The flame. The tower. The sigils meant to signify balance and protection. But someone distorted them. Bent inward. A new glyph added to the center—something older, rougher. Something that burns into my vision even after I look away.

“This is for you,” Max says, voice low.

“I know.”

Cain’s message isn’t subtle. He wants us to see what happens when we let our guard down. He’s not only threatening the pack. He’s threatening me, Ryder’s leadership, our bloodline, and maybe more than that.

Back at the lodge, Ryder’s already waiting. I barely step into the war room before he’s tossing me a data slate with a grim nod.

“We caught a Crimson Claw wolf on the northeast ridge this morning. Not alone, either. We took out the other two. He surrendered.”

“Convenient,” I mutter, scanning the intel.

“He’s caged. Wants to talk.” Ryder looks up. “With you.”

Perfect.

We head downstairs, past the lower corridors, to a reinforced room that used to be a root cellar, before Ryder turned it into what it is now. Interrogation-ready. Soundproof. Reinforced doors. No magic channels.

The Crimson Claw wolf is inside—young, lanky, sinewy. He paces in a tight circle before sitting on his haunches in the corner. His coat is patchy, riddled with faint

scars and burns, but it's the eyes that stop me. Too calm. Too empty. The kind of void that comes from surrendering everything, including your name.

He lifts his head when I enter. Ears twitch. Then he bares his teeth in what passes for a grin. "Lucas Stone," he says, voice gravel-coated and too casual. "The one Lina calls marked."

I don't answer. I shut the door behind me, step forward, and lean against the far wall. Ryder takes the opposite corner, arms crossed, boots planted. No table. No false civility.

"What's your name?" I ask.

The wolf snorts. "Names are for the living. Mine burned when I gave myself to her."

"Then let's talk about Cain."

That gets a twitch. Not fear—he doesn't have enough soul left for that—but there's something. A flicker of reaction in the way his claws flex against the concrete floor.

"He's not in charge anymore," the wolf says. "You think he's leading this? He was just the doorframe. Not the storm blowing through it."

"Then who is?" Ryder demands.

The wolf turns his head toward me. "You already know. You've felt her."

My jaw tightens. "Lina."

He dips his muzzle in a mock bow. "She doesn't whisper to the wind like your Windriders. She commands it. Tells it where to scream."

I take a step forward, slowly. Deliberately. “Why Sophia?”

“She doesn’t want her,” the wolf says. His voice drops low, almost reverent. “She needs her. Lina’s blood’s not strong enough to hold the gate alone. But Sophia’s bond? Your marked blood tangled with hers?”

The bottom drops in my gut.

“She’s going to use the ritual,” I say, more statement than question.

The wolf bares his teeth again. “You don’t even know what you’re carrying, do you?”

I move before I realize it—slamming my palm into the wall above his head, crowding into his space. My other hand fists in the thick fur along his neck, yanking him close. Not enough to kill. Just enough to make sure he understands this isn’t a game.

“Tell me what she’s planning. Or I swear to whatever ancient rot you worship, you won’t leave this room with your bones intact.”

His pupils dilate. But he laughs. A low, broken sound that scrapes down my spine.

“She’s going to finish what the Elders were too afraid to complete,” he breathes. “She’s going to bind your power and Sophia’s. Permanently. No separation. No turning back.”

I tighten my grip, claws pricking through my restraint, but Ryder is already moving—pulling me back by the arm, voice sharp.

“Enough.”

I let go. Barely.

The wolf stays crouched, tongue lolling like he's pleased with himself.

"She's not just opening the gate," he says, his voice dropping to a whisper. "She's making sure it never closes again."

I don't bother knocking on Sophia's door. I storm in, blade still sheathed on my hip, the operative's words still burning under my skin. She's at the map table, poring over a series of glyph sketches. Her head snaps up, and the second she sees my face, she straightens.

"What happened?"

"Lina's using us. She needs your bloodline. Our bond. That's what this has all been about."

Sophia folds her arms. "You want to tell me what this is about or keep pacing like a pissed-off jaguar?"

I stop. My voice drops. "The ritual. The one your father tried to destroy. What is it?"

She goes still. Then moves slowly to the window. Her silence is answer enough.

"I need the truth, Sophia."

Finally, she turns. "Lina believed she could create a permanent conduit. Not a link. A fusion. Two bloodlines, fused by the gate, anchored through stormblood. She called it the Binding. My father found her research. He tried to burn it."

"And you have it."

"I have the parts she didn't find," she says, lifting her chin. "But even then, it's

incomplete.”

I stalk toward her, close the distance. “But it could work.”

Her gaze flickers. “If the bond is strong enough.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because you were already unraveling!” she snaps. “Because the moment we step over that line, there’s no going back. This isn’t just about magic or power. This is forever. Every part of you and me fused into something the world hasn’t seen since the gates were first sealed.”

“You don’t trust me with that?”

“I wasn’t sure you trusted yourself.”

My power surges, unbidden. I feel it under my skin—my wolf clawing, snarling, slamming against the walls of my control. She sees it, doesn’t back up. Doesn’t even flinch.

“You want to lead me through this?” she asks, stepping closer, chest against mine. “Fine, but stop trying to carry me. I’m not something you protect. I’m something you fight beside. You want this to work? Then trust all of me. Including the storm.”

I grab her wrist, press it to my chest. “Then let’s burn the damn sky together.”

She grins. “Not until you survive me first.”

SOPHIA

The sparring ground is quiet. No one watching now except Isabella, leaning against the gatepost like she's cataloguing every movement we make.

I circle him, blade loose in one hand, eyes on his every shift. He moves with caution—tight, coiled. Like something inside him is too close to the edge. I see it in the way his jaw sets, the way his shoulders twitch. That same pressure behind my ribs answers his tension, something wild and old, begging to be unchained.

He strikes first. Fast, clean. I block it with a twist, step inside, and aim for his shoulder. He pivots, slams into my hip, and I hit the ground. Hard. But I roll into a crouch, eyes locked on him.

I lunge. He ducks. We trade blows—elbow, wrist, knee, blade. My guard rattles with each hit. His knuckles split against it. My boot catches his ribs.

Then I see the opening. I step through his stance and drop him with a spin that knocks the air from his lungs. Knee to his chest. Blade to his throat.

He grins up at me, panting. "I yield."

My smile is slow. Dangerous. "I know."

But we both feel it—this isn't just about the fight. It's everything we haven't said. Everything we're becoming.

I don't move the blade. His chest rises and falls under me, steady but fast. A thin line of blood trickles from where I caught him last. It's not deep, but it marks him. I don't look away. Neither does he.

He said 'yield,' but I see it in his eyes—he hasn't given up. He's given something else. Something quieter. Trust.

I lean in, just enough that my breath brushes his lips. “You fight like you’re trying to silence a war.”

He gives a low grunt, something between a laugh and a sigh. “And you fight like you’re trying to start one.”

“Maybe I am.”

He lifts a hand, slow, and brushes my hair back from my face. There’s a crack in him tonight. Not one I made with a blade. Something deeper. Older than pain. Sharper than fear.

I sheath my knife and crawl off him. My knees sting. My hands ache. There’s a scrape on my ribs where I hit the post. I don’t care. He watches me like I’m the only thing holding him together as I turn toward the lodge.

He stands slowly. Brushes off his hands. Reaches for mine.

I don’t resist.

We don’t speak. We don’t need to.

He leads me to his room. It’s much larger than the guest room I’ve been in. Grander. The attached bath is enormous. The shower could host an orgy—I try not to ask myself if it ever has.

The tile is cold under my feet. The water, scalding. Steam coils around us, thick and ghostly, hiding everything but each other. He steps into the spray, slow. Blood still clings to his jawline. His knuckles are raw. He doesn’t look at me right away. Just stands under the water, eyes closed, arms slack. Heavy. Haunted.

I move toward him, every step measured. I trail my fingers over his chest, then his side—skin warm and bruising beneath my touch. I press a kiss to the darkening spot. Look into his face.

“Don’t hold back with me.”

His eyes open. Wild, golden, and too bright. “I don’t know how to be soft with you,” he says, voice low and rough.

“Then don’t be soft,” I whisper. “Just be here.”

I take his hand and guide it to my hip. His thumb brushes the curve of my waist, tentative. I lead him higher, along my ribs. My grip tightens as I press his hand beneath my breast—clear. Demanding.

He follows.

His mouth moves from my collarbone to my jaw, slow and reverent. I push him against the tile wall, pin his wrists above his head. He doesn’t fight it. Just watches me, eyes narrowed slightly, a ghost of a smile on his lips.

“This is what you want?” he murmurs.

“I want all of you,” I say, voice steady. “But this... this is mine.”

He exhales like he’s letting go of something buried deep. “Then take.”

And I do.

I take with a kiss that feels like a whispered prayer interlaced with a fervent claim—a sensual communion of longing and desire. His lips, coarse from the high mountain

air, carry a surprising warmth and an intimate familiarity, as if both nature and shared memories sculpted them. My fingers trail insistently down his chiseled chest, the scratch of my nails leaving subtle, burning marks that echo the intensity of our passion. Slowly, deliberately, I lower myself to my knees, my eyes tracing every shift in his expression.

I do not hurry this moment. I watch him with rapt attention—his head tilts back, eyes closing in surrender, and his jaw clenches in a mix of anticipation and pleasure. His fingers grasp the ledge behind him so tightly that they render the space almost sacred with their silent plea. I move in sync with the rise and fall of his breath, attuned to the subtle tremors of his body as it strains against a delicious, restrained force. In the delicate pause of his movement, I see his vulnerability in the trembling of his thighs and the nearly silent gasp that slips past his lips.

Kneeling before him, Lucas smiles down at me with a mix of mischief and longing, and, emboldened by his look, I continue my exploration. I free his rigid erection, a proud, throbbing declaration of his arousal, and let my tongue swirl around it in languid, skilled circles, savoring the raw, intoxicating taste of desire and anticipation.

My hand finds its way along his thick, commanding shaft—from the base of the plum-like tip where his passion begins, down towards the dense balls that speak of his need. I lower my mouth, enveloping him gently at first in soft, teasing suction that blooms into more insistent, determined strokes as his quiet moans turn into stifled, pleasure-filled gasps. His hand, light as a caress, runs through my hair, guiding me up and down his length while each pulse of his veins under my tongue becomes a rhythm in our shared dance of lust. I circle the head with reverence, tasting him deeply as if each drop carried the essence of his inner fire. His fingers nestle into my hair, holding me in a tender grip even as the rhythm of his shallow thrusts into my mouth intensifies.

The taste of him is a heady blend of raw power and simmering desire—a flavor so

addictive it drives my hunger higher. Even as I pleasure him, my own desire flares palpably; the throbbing ache of my body hints at the promise of what awaits, a silent longing for the moment we become one again in every sense. The rough fabric of his jeans grazes my cheek as he grows ever more insistent in my mouth, urging me to welcome every part of him. His grunts of ecstasy meld into soft groans of yearning when I pause, only to meet his arousal with slow, demanding kisses that speak of shared impatience.

Hovering above him, I guide his throbbing desire toward the warm, inviting entrance of my core. Anchoring myself by gripping his hips firmly, I allow him to steady me as I take him within me once more. In that sacred alignment, he lets me set the pace, and our mutual desire leads us into a slow, hypnotic rhythm where our breaths merge into a single, primal cadence. My head falls softly against his shoulder while he presses his face into the tender hollow of my neck, his warm, trembling breath sending shivers of delight across my skin.

No words pass between us. We converse only through the language of movement—complementary and unspoken, free from the desire to fight or dominate. Instead, we are simply together, our bodies entwined in a delicate balance of need and reverence. His hands cradle my hips as if I were a rare treasure, and my fingers navigate the soft terrain of his hair while my lips linger on the warmth of his shoulder. Every thrust, every shallow gasp, every meeting of skin against skin builds slowly into a crescendo that transcends mere physical release.

When our passion finally peaks, it is not an explosive burst, but an all-encompassing flood—an overwhelming cascade that consumes us. In that ultimate surrender, my nails dig deeply into him as I shatter into fragments of ecstasy. He groans against my skin, his arms wrapping around me with a desperate, protective strength, as if in that embrace we were the last bastions of solidity in a world on the brink of collapse.

Later, when I slide off him, my body hits the cold tile. He settles beside me, one hand

under my chin, the other drawing slow shapes on my stomach.

“We’re not breaking,” I whisper. “We’re bending toward each other.”

His voice is rough, but sure. “Then let’s break the rest of the world first.”

CHAPTER 14

SOPHIA

The lodge is already buzzing when I walk in. Not the usual soft hum of Nightshade wolves coming and going through the halls, not even the tense silence we've all learned to live with over the past few weeks. No, this is louder. Sharper. Voices raised just enough to be threatening, boots too heavy on hardwood floors, the kind of energy that settles under the skin like a live wire.

Lucas walks beside me, his presence a wall of calm, dangerous purpose. Ryder and Isabella flank us, both dressed like they're ready for a war that might start in the next five minutes. Because it might.

They cleared the main hall, pushing every table to the side, creating a wide circle of chairs filled with wolves from nearly every regional pack. Ironclaw's delegation sits to the right—older, more reserved, all in muted armor and colder expressions. Thornfang's wolves glare from the opposite side, as if they regret being forced to surrender their weapons at the door.

And us? Nightshade's front and center, Ryder gives way to Lucas, who takes the lead. Not just by design. But by instinct.

He doesn't pause when he reaches the center of the room. He just turns, folds his arms across his chest, and speaks.

"We called this summit because the world you think you're still living in is gone."

No preamble. No apologies. Just truth, thrown like a blade.

I step up beside him, holding the journal we recovered and a data slate with the latest findings. I meet every gaze I can as I speak.

“We’ve uncovered glyphs—ancient, corrupted ones. We now know Lina, the Windrider, thought dead, is alive. She and Cain have been working together. Experimenting. Creating hybrid creatures with shifter DNA twisted by something pulled from the Deep Below.”

There’s a flicker from Ironclaw. No surprise. Recognition.

I nod to Lucas, and he gestures to the slate Ryder’s just passed to the closest elder. It cycles through images—Cain’s lab, the hybrid fetus in the tank, the glyphs on the walls.

“We believe they’re trying to open the gate permanently,” Lucas says. “Not to step through. To bring what’s beneath to the surface.”

Grumbles rise across the room. Doubt. Frustration. I wait. Let it build. Then I strike.

“These are not legends. They’re not Windrider campfire stories. I’ve seen Lina. I’ve felt her power. And Lucas has heard the call from beyond the gate. Something is waking, and it’s using Cain and Lina to clear the path.”

“She’s a Windrider,” one of the Thornfang elders scoffs, waving a hand. “They’ve always believed in ghosts and doors that should stay shut. This is superstition wrapped in science fiction.”

“No,” I say calmly, “this is your reality now.”

“You expect us to believe Cain—a mortal scientist—is summoning demons from ancient realms?”

“He’s not a scientist anymore,” I reply. “He’s a conduit.”

Another voice—female, curt, from one of the western packs. “So, what do you propose? We march into every lab and blow it sky high? Hope one of them has the gate hiding in the basement?”

“We infiltrate,” Lucas says. “We’ve identified a probable location in the eastern ridge. Reinforced compound. High activity. Too much power is being drawn to be coincidental.”

“And if we’re wrong?” the Thornfang elder presses.

“Then I’ll die finding out,” Lucas replies, his voice flat.

The room stills. He doesn’t posture. He doesn’t raise his voice. He just promises. And it lands like thunder.

Before anyone can recover, a door creaks open. Max steps inside. He’s thin, face still a little too pale, but he walks on his own. No stagger. No escort. Just a slow, steady stride that brings the room to silence.

I see Kylie standing just inside the doorway. Her hand tightens on the frame as if daring anyone to challenge him.

Max stops in the center of the room. Lucas steps back. I do the same. This is his moment, and we all feel it.

“I was in Cain’s facility,” Max says. “Held for nearly three months. Exposed to

something... not natural. Gas that suppresses the wolf. Experiments to track gene expression. Pain, not to kill—but to change.”

The room stays silent.

Max looks around, voice steady. “They’re not just altering us. They’re stripping out what makes us wolves. What makes us pack. They want something new. Something that doesn’t need a bond. Doesn’t need loyalty or law. Just hunger. Just obedience.”

A shiver rides down my spine. Because I’ve seen it now, in Lina’s face. The complete absence of empathy.

Max straightens. “If we let Cain continue, we won’t be defending our homes anymore. We’ll be hunting our own.”

That lands hard. No one speaks for a long moment.

Then Ryder steps forward. “We’re calling for a vote,” he says. “One representative per pack. Choose your stance now.”

A buzz picks up again. Whispers. Debates. Some wolves rise and form smaller circles to vote. Others sit silent, already knowing.

Thornfang’s elder stands, looking directly at Lucas.

“We don’t trust Windriders. We’ve seen too many ‘visions’ turn into wildfire. But if Cain is truly gone rogue—if this Lina is real—then waiting makes us prey.” He nods once. “Thornfang votes to hunt.”

One by one, the others cast their votes. A few abstain. Ironclaw, after a long pause, raises a hand.

“We support the task force. But you’ll do it under the council’s oversight.”

Lucas gives a tight nod. “Agreed.”

Ryder steps forward. “Then it’s done. A joint operation. Lucas and Sophia will lead it. The rest of us will reinforce regional lines, monitor for movement, and be ready if the gate opens.”

There’s no applause. No cheers. Just a thick, collective understanding that this is war. Not the clean kind. The quiet kind. The kind that starts in shadows and doesn’t end until something—or someone—bleeds.

I take a breath. Then another. I look at Lucas. He’s watching me like he always does—steady, unyielding, with that fire behind his eyes. Not long ago, I would’ve run from that fire. Now I think it’s the only thing that might keep me warm when the world finally cracks open.

Max turns and walks out. Ryder follows. Isabella lingers by the door until Lucas gestures for her to go.

The summit disperses like smoke—quick, hot, and leaving behind a sharp scent of things unfinished. Delegates peel off into corners, snapping at each other in low voices. Thornfang leaves first, muttering about preparations and “weapons they should’ve been using a long time ago.” Ironclaw lingers. Watching. Always watching.

Ryder, Max, and Isabella disappear toward the south wing. Lucas doesn’t follow. He stays silent beside me as I scoop up the journal and data slate, wrapping the glyph pages in a strip of cloth from my belt pouch. The moment the door closes behind the last delegate, the lodge goes quiet again. Too quiet.

Lucas's gaze cuts sideways. "You did good in there."

I laugh once, soft and sharp. "We didn't get agreement. We got reluctant compliance. And only because Max stood up when he should be in bed."

Lucas's mouth tightens. "He stood because no one else could say what he experienced."

"He stood because if we're right, none of this ends with survival. It ends with who we decide to become before the gate takes that choice from us."

Lucas watches for what seems like an eternity before he speaks again. "And what do you want to become, Sophia?"

I hate that question. Because I don't know. Because maybe I already am something I never meant to be.

But I don't say that. I drop the bundle of glyphs on the map table and turn toward him. "I want to be the storm," I say. "Not the one that kills. The one that clears the air."

His eyes narrow, and there's something in him that uncoils—something dangerous and familiar.

"Then don't hold back," he says. "With me. Not tonight."

I don't answer. I don't need to. I move first.

A suffocating darkness swallows the hallway, each shadow a voyeuristic spectator to our every move. The lodge slumbers in a deceptive quiet as we stride toward his secluded room. I fall behind him into this intimate refuge, and as the door clicks shut

with deliberate finality, the outside world vanishes altogether. No words are wasted; there is no pause—only a wildfire of heated touches and a mounting, explosive desire.

He pivots toward me, his jaw clenched with fierce resolve, eyes burning with an intensity that speaks of a thousand untold confessions. I step into his personal gravitational pull, my fingers tightening around the loose collar of his shirt, still undone from our earlier journey.

His breath stutters, a staccato rhythm caught in the turbulence of my touch as my hands set off on an audacious exploration along the hardened contours of his chest, pushing his shirt off his shoulders. They trace every scar, every battle—each faded mark a testament to his endurance and the countless times he bled and rebuilt.

I lower my mouth to one of these battle worn memories, pressing my lips against the lingering ghost of a blade's kiss—a wound not born of my making but carrying a desperate, volatile longing I can barely contain. Beneath my touch, I feel his powerful heartbeat tearing at the qu: a relentless, vibrant pulse that refuses to be silenced.

“Let me,” I offer with a magnetic insistence that brooks no refusal.

At that, Lucas offers nothing more than a single, potent nod—the entire conversation conveyed in that subtle, wordless exchange.

His eyes devour me like a ferocious beast, and I can feel an almost burning heat erupting from his skin. He pulls back just enough, his hands trailing along my arms with a magnetic urgency as he strips me of my clothing so I am naked to his gaze. He gently cradles the back of my head as he draws me in closer. A cascade of goosebumps ignites along my skin, the reality of our primal need crashing over me like a tidal wave.

Our lips collide once more as an overwhelming passion seizes us. I moan against him, lost in the heat of his kiss while his tongue boldly tangles with mine, sparking a deep, incendiary warmth that radiates to my very core. My fingers slip between us to unbuckle his belt—the soft jingle of metal punctuating the moment—as I push his jeans down, leaving him as naked as I am.

He exudes a wild, untamed essence—an intoxicating scent and taste that ignites a hunger in me I can never quench. As our kiss intensifies, his hands wander feverishly over my body, caressing every elegant curve while my own hands explore every inch of him with desperate fervor.

We break apart for only a heartbeat, lungs raw and pounding as we lock eyes. The hunger in his stare is insatiable, and I find myself yearning for that same relentless need. Gently, he takes me to his bed, his gaze tethering mine as if our souls are one. Every movement in our intimate sanctuary pulses with electrifying eroticism.

With deliberate seduction, he licks his lips before leaning over my exposed body, planting a trail of burning kisses along my skin, until his mouth finally encircles my most sensitive spot. I gasp, arching into him as my fingers clutch the sheets, each teasing flick of his tongue igniting shivers of pleasure that radiate through every nerve. Relentless and determined, he devotes himself to driving me to the edge.

Lost within the intensity of his ministrations, his tongue dances with precision along my clit. The moisture pools at my core as my thighs part instinctively, inviting him in further. I ache for that explosive release, desperate for the fulfillment that only his touch can bestow—a pleasure I've only ever dared to imagine.

Every sizzling stroke sends me spiraling closer to climax, my heart pounding wildly while my breath shatters into ragged gasps. The sound of my moans fills the room as Lucas, completely focused, continues his expert dance of desire.

Briefly, he lifts his head, a wicked grin playing on his lips as he surveys my sweat-soaked, exhilarated form. In his eyes, I catch the fiercely satisfied glint of a man who knows he is delivering ecstasy. I pull him in again, our lips fusing in a kiss of pure, passionate defiance that seals our undeniable connection.

Finally, in a voice trembling with raw need, I confess, "I want you inside me," craving the sensation of his hard, commanding cock. He arches an eyebrow, licking his lips and smiling as he aligns himself with my entrance before plunging into me with ferocious intensity. I gasp sharply at his sudden, forceful entry, each thrust igniting waves of overwhelming ecstasy.

His impressive girth fills me completely, each powerful thrust stretching me wider as he plunges deep with relentless force. He pounds into me and through it all, his eyes remain locked on mine, driving a rhythm that sends tremors of pleasure coursing through every fiber of my being. I toss my head back, gripping the rumpled sheets as my nails sink into the fabric, my composure slipping away under the mastery of his touch.

He quickens his pace—thrusting harder, faster, propelling my desire to dizzying new heights. My moans escalate into frantic gasps and cries of pure, unadulterated pleasure until I teeter on the brink of overwhelming release. In one breathtaking moment, he claims me with a fierce, animalistic passion, driving me to an orgasm so intense it shatters every expectation, before climaxing deeply inside me.

Later, I wake alone. I don't panic. I can feel he is close. The fear that has become a constant companion is still there, curling under my ribs like it always is, but I've learned better than to assume distance means retreat. Not with him.

I pad barefoot down the hall, his shirt hanging off one shoulder, the air cold enough to make my skin pebble. I find him on the lower balcony, crouched low again, elbows braced on his knees.

He doesn't hear me until I touch him.

"Lucas?" I whisper, dropping beside him.

His shoulders jerk. His mouth is open, chest heaving, like he's been running in a nightmare. His fingers dig into the stone like he's anchoring himself in place. He turns to me, and his eyes... they're not their usual warm amber—they're black. Bottomless.

I freeze.

"They're calling," he says.

"Who?"

He shakes his head. "Not a voice. Not like language. Just a sound. Like thunder under the skin. It's coming from the gate. From beneath. I can feel it... like it's inside me now."

I cup his face in both hands. "Look at me."

His breath hitches.

"Lucas. Look at me."

He blinks. Gold flickers through the black, flickering like a flame trying not to go out.

"I'm here," I say. "You're not going anywhere without me."

His forehead presses to mine. His voice is quiet. "I don't know how much longer I can keep it back."

“You don’t have to,” I tell him. “You just have to hold it long enough to end this.”

He nods, jaw clenched, but I can feel it too now. Not the sound—but the shift in the air.

Something in the Deep Below has found his scent, and it wants him... badly.

We slip away through the kitchen, out past the garden, and into the ridge path without stopping for coats. The cold doesn’t bother either of us. Not when the air is this clear, this still. Up here, above the lodge, the forest sprawls like a sea of black and silver, moonlight dancing off the frost-covered treetops. The quiet helps. For a moment, I can almost forget what just happened.

Lucas stands beside me, matching my silence with his own. He’s always done that. Known when to push and when to stand still. It’s a strange comfort—this man who carries storms like they’re stitched into his bones, choosing to be quiet next to me instead of commanding the world to listen.

I reach out, brush my fingers over his, and he twines them with mine without a word. The wind catches my braid, flicking strands of my hair into my face. We strip and stuff our clothes into a run pack. He always seems to know what I need—sometimes, I think, even before I know it myself.

I close my eyes and let the cold bite through the last of my restraint. The storm inside me surges, and I let go.

Mist coils around my ankles, then climbs. It gathers fast, streaked with violet and silver, humming through the air like it’s been waiting. Lightning skims along my skin, and then I’m gone—two-legged form replaced by four. Silver fur, storm-marked eyes, heart pounding with wild rhythm. The world sharpens into instinct and scent and the deep, quiet call of the forest.

Lucas doesn't hesitate. A breath later, he follows. His form slams into place beside mine—dark fur like smoke, eyes catching the moon. For once, his wolf isn't straining or snarling beneath the surface. It's there. Whole. Present. He runs toward me, not away from himself.

We take off into the trees.

No plan. No map. Just movement. Power. Unity.

The forest opens before us like it remembers who we are. Frost snaps under our paws. Birds lift from branches in startled silence. We weave between trees, vault fallen logs, scale a ridge that splits the mountains like a scar. Every turn, every pulse of our feet against the earth is synchronized.

We don't need words. He runs ahead. I catch him. I dive low. He leaps over. We move as one. Wild. Whole.

I don't know how long we run, only that when we stop, I'm not shaking anymore. Speed and wind and the steady presence at my side have burned away the fear, the pressure.

We shift back under a canopy of pine. The stars flicker through branches overhead. My breath comes fast, but I'm not tired. Just clear.

Lucas brushes his thumb over my jaw. We don't speak.

Slowly, we dress again, pulling on the spare clothes tied to our run-packs, and wander the last few yards back to the hollow tree that sits at the edge of a clearing most wolves don't know exists. It's older than Nightshade. Older than any of us. Windriders used it as a burial site for broken glyphs and spent wards. Windriders used it to store magic that wouldn't fade naturally.

I kneel beside it, fingers brushing moss away from the base until I find the seal etched in the bark—a crescent line, one dot above it, two below. My stomach drops.

The bark is split. The glyph has been ripped open. Inside, I find the fragments of an old sigil. Paper. Twine. A bead made of windglass—all of it, broken.

Lucas crouches beside me. “What does it mean?”

I close my eyes. “It means something came through already.”

I look up toward the mountains, toward the direction of the compound we haven’t infiltrated yet.

Cain didn’t open the gate. He opened a door inside it, and something has already walked through.

CHAPTER 15

LUCAS

The path narrows the higher we climb, winding through jagged ridgelines and shale-strewn drop-offs that would snap a weaker wolf's ankle in half a second. The wind up here doesn't just blow... it howls. The mountain doesn't want us here. Neither does whatever waits inside for us.

Dead pine needles crunch under my boots, thick with frost, but I barely feel the cold. I'm running too hot—too wired, too aware. The energy in the air is wrong. It's not just the altitude. The deeper we get into the Dead Valley range, the more the wind sounds like it's speaking in a language no one understands. Except me.

We move in formation—tight, efficient, no wasted motion. Max flanks to the left, carrying a blade longer than my forearm and no time for bullshit. Kylie is on the right, tossing a small blade from hand to hand like she's hoping something jumps out of the rocks just to break up the boredom. It won't be boredom for long.

Sophia walks behind me. I feel her before I hear her—stormlight barely restrained, the surrounding air always just a little warmer, a little charged. We have spoken little since leaving the lodge this morning. We don't need to. She's already where I am. Head down. Eyes forward. Both of us locked into a rhythm that doesn't come from planning. It's instinct.

"I count four glyphs," Max mutters as we reach a ridge, pointing with the tip of his blade. "Burned into the stone. Same mark as the threshold rune at the last facility."

I crouch, brushing my fingers over one of them. The soot-covered rock is scorched. This wasn't a drawing or a painting. It was a brand—heat-forged into the mountain.

Sophia steps up beside me. “These aren't warning wards. They're anchors.”

“Anchors for what?”

She points toward the valley below us. “A gate. This isn't a lab, Lucas. It's a ritual site. Look at the pattern—concentric placement, directional runes facing inward. Something's buried in this rock, and they're using these to call it up.”

Kylie glances over her shoulder. “So we're hiking toward a haunted mountain altar. Love that for us.”

Oscar doesn't laugh. He rarely does. Kylie's the one with the sarcastic sense of humor. He taps the comms link in his ear and mutters, “Team One, be advised. Multiple glyphs found on the outer perimeter. Suggest structural binding ritual in progress.”

A crack of static answers, followed by, “Copy. Moving into secondary position.”

The other Nightshade scouts fan out while we push higher, the incline biting into my calves. Breathing gets harder the closer we get to the peak, but this is not altitude sickness. It's something altogether different.

I hear it again. It starts low, beneath the wind. A hum more than a sound. It sinks into my bones like a vibration from within. Not painful—yet—but constant. Familiar. And wrong.

I stop moving. The mountain falls quiet. The team halts behind me.

Sophia's voice is soft. "Lucas?"

I don't answer. The hum is rising, splitting in two, then three—like it's weaving a song only I can hear just under my skin. My vision darkens around the edges. The scent of ash fills my nose.

The call again. Clearer now. Like a rising whisper pressed to the base of my skull.

"Stoneblood. Stormborn. Come home."

My hands shake. My wolf stirs, frantic, not with rage but confusion—torn between answering and fleeing—trapped and forbidden from doing either. I press my palm to the nearest boulder, trying to steady myself, but the glyph carved into it pulses beneath my skin like it recognizes me. Like it knows what I am.

"Lucas." Sophia's voice is sharper now.

I drop to one knee. The sound—no, the call—is clawing at my mind. My name echoes back at me in layers. A thousand voices. All me. All wrong.

Then hands. Warm, steady. Her hands.

Sophia drops in front of me, grabs my face between her palms, and slams her mouth onto mine.

The call stops as reason and reality return. The call shatters like glass. The world slams back into focus. The only sound now is the pounding of my heart and the soft, urgent rush of her breath against my lips.

She pulls back, eyes fierce. "We're here."

I grab her wrist, grounding myself with her pulse. “You felt it?”

“Enough to know it was trying to pull you apart. Don’t let it.”

I nod once. My voice doesn’t come easily, but I manage two words. “Thank you.”

We move again. Slower now. The air’s thicker, the wind heavier. Even the birds are gone. Dead silence hugs the upper slope, and the sky darkens unnaturally overhead as we reach the entrance carved into the mountainside.

They didn’t just build the facility into the rock—they grew it from the rock. Stone walls ripple with barely restrained glyph lines, each one feeding into the next like a living network of magic veins. Something tore open the entrance, creating a jagged oval that is too tall and too narrow. Oscar and the other Nightshade scout who accompanied us peel off to sweep the perimeter. Max and Kylie close ranks.

“I don’t like this,” Max says quietly, shaking his head as if to dispel something. “Feels like we’re walking into a gaping mouth with razor-like teeth.”

“Whoa. Descriptive much?” Kylie quips, tightening her grip on her knife. “Then let’s make sure it chokes on whatever it thinks to eat.”

The terrain turns brutal as we approach the entrance. Stone and ash underfoot, no grass, no moss, not even the stubborn alpine shrubs that usually cling to the bones of these mountains. Just a long stretch of jagged black rock, brittle as charred bone, steep enough to snap ankles and swallow knees. Every step is a calculated risk. One wrong move and we’re tumbling through a graveyard that predates names.

Max takes point, silent and watchful. His breathing is steady, but his body reads like a man walking into his own execution. Sophia and Kylie move just behind him, low and deliberate, blades out. I stay near the rear. Watching for anything that might

come from behind. Listening for what I hope doesn't come again.

But it does.

The sound starts as a pulse, deep in my chest. Like a war drum being played beneath the earth. Faint at first. Then louder. Then personal. It slides behind my ribs and slams into my spine with enough force to make my jaw lock. I stagger, just a little. No one sees.

Except her.

Sophia glances back, stops mid-step, and turns. Her braid's half-loose from the climb, a streak of dirt across her cheek, but her eyes are sharper than any weapon we brought with us.

"Lucas." Just my name, but it's enough.

I open my mouth to answer, to say I'm fine, but the words don't come. The call gets louder. Not words. Not even sound. Just pressure . Like I'm being pulled forward by a leash wrapped around my spine.

My hands curl into fists. The rock beneath my boots ripples. No one else sees it. No one else hears the sound beneath the sound.

Except her. Sophie reaches me quickly, one hand going to my chest. The other wraps around the back of my neck. Her forehead presses to mine.

"Lucas," she says again, firmer. "You're not down there. You're here. With us. With me ."

I grit my teeth, but the pounding doesn't stop. My wolf snarls inside me, desperate to

follow, desperate to run straight into whatever wants to tear me apart.

Then she kisses me. It's not soft. It's not for comfort. It's a strike. A jolt. Storm to storm. The contact is electric and immediate. My lungs catch. My pulse slams back into sync with hers. The wind kicks up around us, sharp and biting, and for a breathless second, everything else falls silent.

She pulls back only far enough to look at me. "We're here. Stay here ."

And just like that, I can.

Max looks over his shoulder, expression unreadable. Kylie says nothing, but grins in her most infuriating manner.

We keep moving.

The last half mile is hell. The incline is nearly vertical in places, and the rock here isn't natural. Someone etched glyphs into the surface—burning them into the stone with a precision that screams of old power. Spirals arrange some glyphs, landslides half-cover others, and some still glow faintly with heat as if recently marked.

Kylie stops to run her fingers along a jagged spiral cut into the wall. Her voice is tight. "This isn't just a base. It's a ritual site."

I nod. "The gate is near."

No one argues.

The entrance to the compound doesn't look like much. Just a jagged tear in the rock, hidden behind a series of broken spires that must've once been a barrier wall. We move single file, weapons out, senses high. The air inside is colder. Wet. Something

drips in the distance. Not water. Too thick.

We descend into a corridor carved from dark stone. Not a natural cave. Too smooth. Too deliberate. Every twenty feet, there's another glyph. Some of them Windrider. Some I don't recognize. Some I wish I didn't. Scattered along the walls are flickering light panels—most broken.

The tunnel opens into a chamber, massive and echoing. It opens abruptly, a yawning cavern carved with inhuman precision, as if whatever made this place didn't work with hands. The space is circular, massive, and dead silent. Our footsteps land hollow. Every sound bounces back like the mountain is mocking us. But it's the center of the room that stops us cold.

A raised dais. Stone. Bone. Silver.

Five concentric circles surround the dais, each etched with glyphs. A crack mars the outermost circle. The second is pulsing faintly with light. The third—some symbols are bleeding. Not metaphorically. Bleeding. A thin trail of something dark seeps down the grooves.

At the center of it all is the gate.

It's not just a door. It's alive .

Made from silver and ancient bone, twined with runes and old elemental sigils, it stands ten feet high and half as wide. Chunks of black stone, pulsing like veins, have fused with the tarnished and cracked metal. A low thud comes from within it. Not sound. A heartbeat. Slow. Measured—like something on the other side is asleep and starting to wake up.

I hear it again. But this time, it doesn't pull. It warns.

Sophia edges forward with me, her voice barely above a whisper. "The heartbeat."

She's right. The gate pulses. Not like a machine. Like a living thing.

I scan the floor—no guards, no Crimson Claw in sight. Too quiet.

Kylie points to a panel half-buried beneath glyph dust. "Something has recently been activated." That means someone's still here."

I nod once, every nerve on fire.

The gate pulses again. The heartbeat inside it is getting stronger. And I know, without question, that whatever is waiting behind that veil? It's awake. And it knows we've arrived.

Sophia touches my arm. "The air's different."

"How?"

"It's humming. Like it's listening."

Kylie lets out a low whistle. "That's not a gate. That's a promise."

Max doesn't speak. He just stares, and I see something in his expression that chills me worse than the wind outside.

Recognition.

Sophia steps up beside me. Her voice is quiet. "It's not fully open. But it's close."

"How close?"

She swallows hard. "Close enough that it can feel us."

I turn back to the others. "We don't split. Not for anything. If something moves, we kill it. If the gate so much as shudders, we get the hell out."

Kylie cocks her head. "And if it opens ?"

I meet her gaze dead-on. "Then we make sure nothing walks through it alive."

The heartbeat from the gate slows. For now.

But I know better than to think we have time. We're standing on the edge of something ancient. Something that doesn't care who we are, only that we bleed. And whatever Cain and Lina have been building toward... this is just the beginning.

And beginnings? They always cost more than you think.

CHAPTER 16

SOPHIA

The heartbeat of the gate is louder now. Not just heard, but feels like standing too close to a subwoofer set to some ancient, deadly frequency. The mountain compound pulses with it, steady as a drumbeat marking the slow march to something catastrophic.

Lucas and I stand just inside the dais chamber. The others scan every corner, every glyph, and every passage branching out from this monstrous heart. But I can't move. Not yet. My gaze is fixed on the glyph pattern carved into the stone surrounding the dais.

"It's not containment," I murmur, crouching and running my fingers just above the etched lines. The glyphs twist in on themselves, the curves jagged, the energy wrong in a way that makes my skin crawl and my bones ache.

Lucas's shadow falls over me as he steps close. "You recognize it?"

"Parts of it. It's... it was a banishment seal. Ancient. Windwoven." I swallow hard, my voice thick. "But they altered it. Not sloppily. Deliberately. The inversion isn't accidental. It's designed to anchor."

"Anchor?" he echoes, eyes narrowing.

"To this plane," I say. "They're not just trying to open the gate. They want to make it

permanent. Fixed. Not a door, but a doorframe.”

Lucas crouches beside me, jaw clenched as he studies the pattern. “Shit. So the gate can’t just be closed. It has to be broken.”

I nod. “And if it’s anchored... that’s going to take more than glyphs and blood.”

He doesn’t flinch. One of the things I love—did I just say love?—about this wolf is, he never does. “Then we bring the storm.”

We move on; the others falling into formation again. Max and Kylie peel off at the first branch to sweep for movement, Kylie muttering something about playing exterminator. Oscar has rejoined us, but hangs back near the entrance to cover our retreat. If it comes to that. I’m not sure anyone believes we’ll be leaving the way we came in. I know I sure as hell don’t.

The corridor narrows, walls pressing in. The air here is colder, sharp with iron and something else—something that smells like wet stone and burnt ozone. My skin prickles. Lucas’s hand stays close to the small of my back. Not pushing. Not leading. Just... there.

“I don’t like this,” I whisper.

He doesn’t speak, but his hand brushes lower, fingers grazing the hilt of the dagger I carry at my thigh. Just checking. Just grounding me—reminding me, I am not alone nor am I unarmed.

We round a bend and enter another chamber—smaller with a lower ceiling; its walls covered in the same spiraling glyphs but with one major difference. There’s something on the floor.

Lucas steps forward first, blade drawn. I trail behind him and then stop cold.

It's a body—or it was. The thing lying in the center of the room used to be wolf, maybe, or perhaps one of the Crimson Claw. But now it's twisted, elongated in places it shouldn't be. The rib cage is too wide, the limbs too long. Dark fluid has matted its fur, and its claws are blackened and fused. Its eyes are open, glazed—but still moving. Twitching. There's no breath. No pulse. But the muscles beneath the skin spasm, like something else is trying to make it move.

“Oh hell no,” I mutter.

Lucas crouches beside it, inspecting the chest. “No visible incision.”

“That's because it wasn't created. Someone changed it. This isn't biological reanimation. This is ritual magic. Anchored in tissue.”

He doesn't look up. “Are you sure about that?”

I point to the glyph burned into the creature's sternum. “That's a living rune. It only activates in proximity to power. Like mine. Or yours.”

The creature's paw twitches again. This time, the claw jerks upright, then collapses.

Lucas rises. “We burn it. Now.”

I don't argue.

He pulls a flash rod—a kind of powerful electronic flame starter with accelerant—from his belt, cracks it, and tosses it onto the creature. Light floods the space, a violet-white burst that sears the air. The body jerks once, violently, and then goes still. The smell is worse than anything I've ever known—singed hair and burnt

corruption.

We leave it behind.

Back in the corridor, Lucas radios Kylie. “You find anything?”

“Two more chambers, empty. But it smells like something passed through not long ago. Max is marking the glyph trails.”

“Anything moving?”

“Not yet. But the air’s getting mean.”

Lucas clicks off and glances at me. “It’s not just the air.”

We follow the corridor deeper, and it leads us to something I didn’t expect. The room is different from the others. Smaller, circular, carved entirely from black stone. The ceiling is domed; the floor raised in a perfect circle, and at its center lies a broken blade... and not just any blade.

I rush forward and drop to my knees before it. The Windwoven sigils on the hilt are unmistakable. A crack runs down the middle of the metal; something more than mere use has dulled its edges. Elemental scorch marks trace up the blade’s length. I reach out with trembling fingers and run a hand along the flat.

“My father’s,” I whisper. “This was his.”

Lucas crouches beside me. “How do you know?”

I don’t answer. I can’t. My vision starts to haze, like fog curling along the edges of my sight. The glyphs on the wall shimmer. The air crackles, and the blade burns hot

under my palm.

Then I'm gone.

The vision strikes with the intensity of a lightning bolt—swift and all-consuming, leaving no room for anything else. I see her vividly.

Lina stands before the imposing gate, its grandeur and intimidation far more formidable than I ever imagined. Intricate, deep carvings desecrate her alabaster-pale skin, disrupting its once pristine smoothness like ancient runes etched into sacred stone. She's methodically etching glyphs into her arms, her chest, and her neck with the precision of an artist creating a masterpiece, each stroke deliberate and exact. However, she employs no ordinary tools; instead, her fingers work the magic, their nails extended unnaturally and tipped with sharp black stone resembling obsidian talons. Each incision brings the glyphs to life, fiercely glowing with an ethereal luminescence that slowly fades, as if the blood drawn nourishes these mystical symbols.

Behind her, Cain's voice rises, chanting with a resonance that seems to originate from a realm far beyond human comprehension, guttural and raw like the growl of an ancient beast. The words he speaks are foreign to me, perhaps an ancient language lost to time, but the gate comprehends them perfectly. It pulses and thrums, a living entity in sync with his rhythmic incantation, responding to the call. As Lina lifts her hands, commanding the very air with an unseen force, a column of translucent windglass emerges from the floor. It rises with an elegant grace, aligning itself with the gate's center with a decisive, resonating click, as if a lock has finally found its destined key.

I scream, and the vision shatters into fragments.

My back hits the stone floor of the altar room, my lungs dragging in air like I've been

drowning.

Lucas is already beside me, arms around my shoulders, voice low and urgent in my ear. “Sophia. Talk to me.”

I blink. The ceiling spins. “It was her. She’s carving the glyphs into her own skin. Cain was behind her—he’s... he’s changed.”

“Changed how?”

“Not mortal anymore.” I clutch at his shirt. “And the gate... they’re not trying to open it from here. They’re anchoring it from the other side.”

Lucas goes still. “Say that again.”

I swallow hard. “They’re not trying to open the gate from our side.”

Before he can answer, the chamber shudders. The glyphs on the walls flare to life, igniting in sequence like someone lit a fuse beneath the stone.

The heartbeat returns—louder.

Faster.

The gate has found us again. And this time, it’s not content with whispering... it’s coming.

The scent of copper and ozone clings to my skin like oil as I rise slowly to my knees. I still hold the broken blade—my father’s—and it pulses faintly, as if the vision I just survived hasn’t finished with me yet. My breath drags in sharp and fast. My heart feels like it’s trying to tear itself out of my chest.

Lucas kneels beside me, both hands firm on my shoulders. “Sophia.”

I blink hard. The flickering afterimage of Lina’s face—calm, cruel, exultant—won’t leave me. The glyphs carved into her arms, her neck, even her face. Blood soaking into skin like ink on parchment. Cain’s chanting, that voice not his anymore, in a tongue I don’t understand but still somehow recognize. And the gate pulsing in time with it.

“I saw it,” I whisper.

Lucas’s jaw tightens. “Tell me.”

“They’re not trying to open the gate from our side,” I repeat, as if I can’t quite believe it. My voice cracks, and I grip his forearm for balance. “They’ve already opened it from the other.”

He doesn’t speak. Doesn’t move. But I feel it—the way his body goes impossibly still. His silence is sharper than shouting. His hands tighten on me, anchoring me.

“We’re too late,” I say. “The anchor’s already been dropped. That gate is tethered to her blood, Lucas. Lina’s made herself part of it. The glyphs—she’s carving them into herself. That’s the final seal.”

Lucas’s breath leaves him in a quick burst, and then he’s moving. He takes the broken blade from my hands, studies it once, and tucks it carefully into the strap of his belt.

“Then we destroy the anchor,” he says.

My vision is still fuzzy around the edges, but his voice cuts through the fog. Steady. Relentless. His fury isn’t loud—it never is—but it’s a force all its own. The kind of

fury that makes things obey.

“The glyphs on her body are the ritual,” I tell him. “They’ve tied her into the gate. She’s not opening it. She’s becoming it.”

Lucas hauls me to my feet, one arm braced around my waist. “Then we cut her out.”

The chamber around us answers before I can speak. The walls quake. Glyphs ignite in order—one by one, a clockwise burn lighting up the room in a golden-red spiral. It’s not a trap. It’s an alarm. The gate has recognized us.

Lucas grabs his comm. “Oscar, report.”

The line crackles. Then Oscar’s voice, distorted by static: “Something’s happening. Glyphs on the outer hall just flared. We’re locked in.”

Lucas swears under his breath and clicks over to the next frequency. “Kylie. Max. Report.”

Kylie’s voice comes fast and clipped. “We’re backtracking to your last known position. The glyphs in the tunnel just activated. Some kind of containment net. Max thinks it’s ritual-primed, not electronic.”

Max’s voice cuts in behind hers. “They’re trying to isolate the gate chamber. Keep everything else outside.”

I grab the comm from Lucas. “Then don’t come here. Find the outer runes and disrupt the pattern. We’ll meet you at the central junction once the perimeter glyphs fall.”

A momentary pause, and then Kylie says, “You better still be breathing when we do.”

Lucas is already moving, dragging me with him. The floor underfoot rumbles again, then steadies. But I can feel it—something massive just woke up beneath us. Not a metaphor. Not paranoia. A real, live being and it's hungry.

As we cross back through the corridor, Lucas's hand doesn't leave me. Even when he stops to scan the walls or check the glyphs, his grip stays locked on my wrist, like he's afraid I'll vanish if he lets go.

I squeeze his hand once, trying to steady myself.

He glances at me sideways. "You good?"

"No," I admit, "but I'm not broken. Let's move."

We cross the threshold of the altar chamber just as another glyph bursts into flame along the far wall. It's red-hot, casting long shadows that seem to stretch too far for how narrow the room is.

Lucas stops short. "This isn't just warding. It's calling."

"To her," I say. "To the gate."

"No," he growls. "To us."

Lucas steps past me with determined intent, plunging into the heart of the altar space. The blood on the floor has turned into a dark, sticky layer, silently recounting the story of a recent, brutal sacrifice. The air is thick with an oppressive fog of raw elemental power, heavy and cloying, much like the acrid smoke that trails in the wake of a devastating lightning strike. Such intense reverberations of power should not linger unless someone has intentionally infused the space with their own essence.

In the center of the shadowy room, beneath the wavering luminescence of ancient glyphs etched into the walls, Lucas points to a jagged line of scorched stone. The charred path snakes across the floor like an ominous, deep wound carved into the earth. I approach it cautiously, lowering myself beside it, my fingers hesitantly skimming its edge. The energy retaliates, a sharp, biting force that slices through me with a chilling familiarity that sends shivers down my spine.

“It’s her work,” I murmur.

Lucas crouches behind me. “You’re sure?”

“Absolutely.”

He leans in, voice low against my ear. “Then this is the last place she stood.”

I nod.

He brushes his fingers down my spine, slow, firm, calming. “Then we find the next place she’ll stand. And we end this. We end her... them... whatever it is she’s awakened.”

I rise to my feet, feeling a tremor of determination coursing through me, and turn to face him. The gate's heartbeat pulses within my chest now, synchronized with my own in an unsettling harmony, like a mockery of my resolve. Lucas sees it all—the tremble in my hands, the shaky rhythm of my breathing that betrays my fear.

His gaze locks onto mine, intense and unwavering. "Tell me what you need," he says, his voice a steady anchor amidst the chaos.

I pause, uncertainty gripping me for a moment, before stepping into him, pressing my trembling hands firmly against his chest. "I need to believe we can stop this," I

confess, my voice barely above a whisper.

"Do you believe in me?" he asks, his words a lifeline.

"Always," I reply without hesitation.

His hand gently finds its way to my jaw, tilting my face upward so our eyes meet.

"Then we stop it," he assures me, conviction resonating in his voice.

The room shifts around us once more, another quake rolling through the ground beneath our feet, deeper and more menacing this time. Dust cascades from the ceiling like a fine rain, and the glyphs etched into the walls blaze to life, their light so intense it stings the eyes.

We've been detected. Not by guards or by Lina, but by the gate itself—an ancient and watchful presence. Lucas draws his blade with a determined flourish. "We need to go," he urges.

I nod, my fingers clenching tightly around the edge of my coat, steeling myself for what lies ahead. "We find the anchor. And then we break it," I declare, determination hardening my voice.

But as we step back into the dimly lit corridor, the heartbeat falters briefly, then quickens its pace with renewed vigor. For the first time, I hear something within it—a sound that resembles a voice, yet not quite. It's not a word, but a breath, a knowing presence that chills me to the core. It knows I'm here, and it's waiting.

CHAPTER 17

LUCAS

I don't wait for the glyphs to finish lighting the walls. "Fall back!" I bark, my voice echoing through the corridor.

Sophia's already turning, her hand gripping the blade at her thigh, eyes scanning for the others. Max and Kylie appear around the bend just as another pulse rolls off the dais—a deeper one, louder than the rest. The air folds in on itself, heat slamming into us in a rush that carries more than just sound—it carries pressure, lots of it.

I grab Sophia's arm and shove her behind me just as the shockwave hits.

The sound is a thunderclap wrapped in fury. The walls scream. Stone cracks. Glyphs stutter and collapse inward. Light bends sideways, drawn toward the windglass in the center of the gate as if gravity's forgotten where it belongs. My ears ring, and I hit the floor hard, skidding back into the curve of the hall.

One of the Nightshade scouts—a young male barely old enough to carry a blade—cries out. I look up just in time to see the ceiling drop. A jagged spire of stone spears through his torso, pinning him like a hunted animal to the glyph-washed wall. He doesn't scream again.

Sophia shouts something, but the roar is too loud. I crawl back to her, grabbing her shoulder and dragging her with me toward cover, her feet scrambling to keep pace. Max and Kylie follow, close and silent, weapons drawn. Oscar follows.

Another sound joins the chaos. Lower. Slower. Like breath echoing inside a coffin made of steel.

The windglass is no longer just glowing. It's stretching.

I turn, teeth bared, ready for anything. But what I see... it doesn't belong in this world.

The center of the gate warps. A slick bulge pushes outward, the windglass rippling like fluid held behind something too fragile to contain it. Lines crack across its surface. Black veins of power curl through it. The ancient stone frame groans under the strain.

And then I hear it... the call.

Not a whisper this time. Not even a command. It's a summons—a violent pull that wraps around my ribcage and yanks. My knees go weak. My wolf surges to the surface, no longer confused. No longer fighting.

“Answer. Come to me. Open.”

Pain lances through my skull. I drop to one knee, biting back the sound clawing up my throat. I can't hold it. I can't hold him.

The storm that's lived under my skin since Cain's lab. I don't break. I become.

The change isn't violent. It isn't beautiful. It's absolute. My body moves without hesitation, muscle and energy folding inward and then outward. There's no tearing, no snapping, no time to scream. Just silence. Mist rises from the ground and then floods from every pore—silver and dark, swirling like storm clouds in fast forward.

Sophia stumbles back a step, her lips parting, eyes wide. But not in fear.

She sees me. Fully. And then she shifts, too.

Her form twists in a burst of crackling electricity, lightning skimming her skin like war paint before her body shifts down. Mist and light spiral around her, limbs elongating in a surge of precision and power. Where I'm shadow and smoke, she's fire and fury. Silver eyes. Silver fur. Lightning caught in a body that never should've held it.

She lands beside me with her chest low and ears forward. One breath. We run.

Max swears behind us, but I don't hear the rest of it. I leap from the corridor into the chamber, just as the first of the gate-born creatures cracks through the windglass and hits the stone.

It moves like it doesn't know how its body works yet—jerky, limbs folding wrong—but it's fast. Twice the size of a normal wolf, with slick gray skin where fur should be and spines down its back like broken glass. No eyes. Just hollows.

It hisses, and a second one slithers out behind it.

Sophia's growl cuts through the air like a warning shot. The lead creature turns. Recognizes her. Or me. Or both. It doesn't matter.

She charges first. I flank left.

The creature leaps—awkward, off-balance—but it's strong. Too strong. Sophia crashes into its side with her full weight, lightning exploding from her shoulders, and it screams. Not in pain. Not like prey. It screams like something that remembers what it once was—and hates what it's become.

I hit the second one low, driving it back across the glyphs. It claws at the floor for purchase, but I don't give it a chance. My jaws snap around its foreleg and I pull. The bone doesn't break. There's no bone. Just... tissue. Muscle fused to something darker.

A blast of light sears the wall behind me. Max.

He's covering our backs. Kylie is moving behind him, warding glyphs in her hands, activating one after the other as fast as she can scrawl them. She's sweating. Swearing. But she's not slowing down.

Sophia shoves the first creature back, then pivots, kicking off the stone in a flash of silver and impact. The second one hisses again, then lunges. I meet it midair. We roll, my claws locked into the back of its shoulders, driving it into the rock with a sickening slap.

It stops moving... just for a second. Then its body jerks—not of its own power.

The glyphs flare. Sophia barks once—a short warning call.

I look at the gate. The windglass is gone. Shattered. Behind it, something moves.

Not a creature. Not yet. Just a presence.

The scent hits me last. Not blood. Not death. Old magic. Foul and endless.

A piece of something else is pressing through. Not a hand. Not a claw. Just a shadow. But the surrounding stone fractures in its wake.

Max turns to me, eyes wide. "They're coming through in pieces."

Sophia snarls and leaps again, dragging the first creature toward the dais. Her

lightning scorches the floor, burning glyph trails into the stone. The creature twitches. Then seizes. Then stops.

Dead—and not just partly, but in its entirety.

I brace beside her. My form solid, mist curling around my paws, ears flat against my skull.

We have seconds. Maybe less.

Kylie yells from behind us. “They’re not stopping! The glyphs are summoning more!”

Sophia turns, eyes meeting mine. I see the question there. Can we hold the line? I give her what she needs—one slow nod.

We stand shoulder to shoulder in the chamber where Lina turned herself into a gate.

The next wave is coming.

The second wave crashes through the gate with a scream that rattles the stone beneath my paws.

They’re faster this time. More coordinated. The first two were scouts—prototypes. These things? They’re made for war.

Sophia lunges into the lead one like lightning incarnate, her body a blur of silver and storm. Her claws dig into its throat, and she drives them both to the ground in a crackle of mist and fury. The creature thrashes beneath her, shrieking, its malformed jaw snapping in wild spasms, but she doesn't hesitate. Her stormlight pours through her fangs and into its chest.

It detonates.

The light doesn't just burn it—it breaks it apart. The glyphs carved into its hide fracture like shattered bone, pieces turning to dust before they hit the floor.

But the others don't retreat.

Three more pour through, crawling low and fast, movements twitchy like they haven't figured out how to exist in this world yet—but they're adapting.

One darts toward Kylie. She throws a dagger—precision perfect—and it catches the thing in the eye. Or what would've been an eye if the face wasn't some horror of split cartilage and open bone. The blade sticks, but the creature doesn't fall. It charges harder.

Max barrels into it with a ward charge burning across his palm. Glyphs flare along his forearm—Windrider, Ironclaw and Nightshade runes working together—and when he slams it into the creature's ribs, the impact sends both of them flying.

Kylie doesn't waste the opening. She's on it with her blade before it can right itself, slicing through its throat in three short hacks. The body spasms once... then dies.

The second creature rushes me. I meet it mid-air.

We collide with a force that sends us skidding across the dais, my claws finding its underbelly and tearing through the glyph-lined hide like wet parchment. It shrieks, but I clamp my jaws around its throat and rip it open before it can claw my chest. I taste something wrong—metallic, but old, as if it had brewed in some alchemist's vat for a century.

The body thrashes, kicking wildly, but I don't let go until it goes still.

I drop it. Blood smears the surrounding stone. My breath comes hard and fast through clenched fangs, but I don't stop.

Sophia is still standing. Her form is ringed in flickering light, streaks of violet and silver dancing across her fur like war banners. She turns toward the next one just as it leaps from the dais. This one is bigger—twice the size of the others—it's spine curved like it broke and reformed on the wrong axis. It moves too fast to track with the naked eye. But she sees it coming.

Her paws brace. The air crackles. Then, she launches upward, twisting midair with a scream that carries every storm she's ever swallowed.

Her claws rip through its chest. Lightning explodes outward in a spiral that lights up the entire room. The creature freezes in midair, convulses, and drops like a puppet with cut strings. Smoke coils from the gaping hole where its heart should be.

Silence drops. For a second, there's no movement. Just the sound of dripping blood and scorched stone hissing under pooled heat.

The gate pulses.

Once.

Twice.

Then steadies.

The glyph rings around the dais light up again—not erratically this time, but with purpose. Measured. Controlled. As if something wants this pattern to hold.

Sophia lands hard beside me, panting. Blood mats her fur. Her eyes are wild, but she

stands. I pad to her side, our shoulders brushing. I don't speak. We both hear it.

The voice—it doesn't come from the gate. It doesn't echo through the stone or travel through our comms. It's not even a whisper. It's inside us.

"Your power is not enough. Feed the gate. Feed the bond."

Sophia's head jerks. Her ears flatten. She heard it too.

I bare my teeth, hackles rising. They think we'll do it for them. That the storm between us is something they can use. Not happening.

Behind us, Kylie limps into view, blood smeared down one thigh. Her blade is still slick with gore. "What the hell was that voice?"

Sophia drops her head, shaking with exhaustion. Her form flickers—light sliding off her like water—and a moment later she's on two legs again, naked and blood-spattered, but defiant.

I shift a second later. Still riding the edge of something primal, but I bring it down with effort, pulling my humanity back one breath at a time.

Kylie tosses Sophia a sweater, which she drags over her shoulders and me my pants and mutters, "You're welcome."

"Appreciated. Not Cain," I say.

"Not Lina either," Sophia murmurs. "Older."

"Worse," Max says, stepping around the ruin of a hybrid, his face drawn tight. "Whatever's behind that gate, it's not just trying to break through. It's adapting."

Every time it pulses, it gets smarter.”

Sophia stares at the windglass. “It’s stabilizing itself. We damaged the ritual, but the gate’s learning. It’s forming its own anchor now.”

The windglass pulses again. Just once. No creatures come through this time. It’s waiting. Stalking.

Max steps into the circle of light, eyes fixed on the gate. “They don’t need to open it anymore.”

We all look at him.

“They just need us to.”

The windglass pulses again—gentler this time. Almost like a heartbeat.

I stare at it, jaw tight, every instinct I have screaming. I know what that voice meant now. Feed the gate. Feed the bond. They’re not just using Lina’s glyphs. They’re using us .

The bond between me and Sophia is the final seal. And if we break, if we fail, if we so much as touch that anchor in the wrong way... we’ll be the ones who open the damn thing.

Nope. Not today.

I walk to the edge of the dais, stare into the still-glowing heart of the gate.

“You want a bond?” I mutter. “Come and take it.”

And for the first time since we entered this cursed place... the gate doesn't pulse back.

CHAPTER 18

SOPHIA

We're bleeding, bruised, and panting like we just ran through hell—and maybe we did—but the moment the thick stone door seals behind us and Kylie's last ward flares to life, the world narrows to this space. This silence. This team of five, clinging to the space between now and whatever nightmare waits on the other side of that gate.

The chamber is small, carved directly into the mountain. Crude, old. No glyphs on the walls, thank the gods. Just black stone and a cold floor slick with something that reeks of the familiar scent of ash and old iron. Kylie slumps against the wall and starts inspecting her thigh. Max drops into a crouch near the door, eyes closed, lips moving—counting glyph sequences under his breath as if he's trying to predict the next collapse.

I find Lucas in the corner.

He's on one knee, blood running from a long gash across his ribs, and I can feel him pulling on the last of his control like a lifeline. His form is still humming with residual storm energy, mist flickering at his edges, like he's barely holding himself together.

I drop beside him. "Let me."

He doesn't argue. Not with me. I press my fingers to his side, frowning at the wound. It's already starting to seal, but it's slow. Too slow. Whatever those things were made

of is hindering our healing. Lucas grits his teeth as I drag the ripped fabric aside, exposing more of the wound.

“You took the full hit,” I murmur.

“You took two.” His voice is rough, low, thick with something that isn’t just pain.

“Mine didn’t get its claws in me, and I’m used to dealing with wind and storm energy.”

“Whatever those things are, the one that came after you tried to gut you.”

“I’m still upright.”

“So am I.”

There’s blood on my hands. His blood. It coats my fingers as I clean the slash with water from my canteen, and the contact—skin to skin—sends something crackling under my skin. Not magic. Not stormlight. Just... him. The feel of him. Solid. Present. Mine.

I feel him watching me.

“You’re shaking,” he says.

I glance up. “Adrenaline.”

His gaze drops to my mouth. “That’s not all.”

I sit back on my heels. “Lucas...”

“No,” he says, catching my wrist before I can stand. His grip is firm. Not rough. Just final. “Don’t run from this.”

“I’m not running.”

“You’re backing away,” he says with a half-smile. “Same thing.”

The look in his eyes is darker than anything I’ve seen from him. Not angry. Not demanding. Just... burning. Considering everything we haven’t said... with everything we just fought through... with the storm still boiling under our skin, we’re both too close to the edge.

The others are occupied—Max is muttering glyphs, Kylie is stitching herself up, and Oscar is sitting near the far wall with a blade across his knees, eyes closed. This space is small, but for a moment, it feels like it’s only ours.

“I need to touch you,” he says quietly. “Now.”

I don’t move. I don’t breathe. I just look at him, and whatever he sees in my eyes makes him stand. He pulls me into a tiny alcove, barely big enough for both of us. He backs me into the wall, step by step, his body crowding into mine. My back hits the cold stone, and I gasp, but he’s already there, bracing one arm beside my head.

“You saved me,” he says, voice pitched low enough that only I can hear. “Again. You looked into the gate and didn’t break. You saw Lina and came back. You fought beside me like you were born for this.”

I swallow hard. “I was born for this.”

His mouth brushes my jaw. “Then let me remind you who you belong to.”

My breath stutters, but I don't push him away. I press into him. I grab his shirt and drag him down into me, and when his mouth crashes over mine, it isn't sweet. It's furious. It's need sharpened by blood and battle. He kisses me like he wants to consume me whole—and maybe he does.

I part my lips. He takes it as permission.

His hands skim under my sweater, fingers pressing into my hips, my ribs, the small of my back. When he pulls my sweater over my head, he doesn't bother being careful. I'm panting by the time his mouth finds the hollow of my throat, and when he sucks hard enough to bruise, I hear myself moan.

"You feel that?" he mutters. "That's mine."

I know what he wants. I'm lost to keeping a distance between us. Instead, I give in to the reckless nature of wanting him and knowing destiny fated us to be one. "Then take it."

He pins me with his body, hand on my throat—not squeezing, just holding. Controlling. Every instinct I've buried claws to the surface, and I arch into him, biting his jaw, his shoulder, anything I can reach. I want marks. I want reminders. I want war on my skin and him in my blood.

His mouth returns to my throat. Lower. Then lower still.

He drops to his knees, shoving my pants down as his hands trail fire along my thighs. His mouth finds the heat between them, and I nearly cry out. One hand against the wall, one in his hair. I try to stay quiet. Try to stay in control.

Fail.

Lucas moves down my body, nudging my legs apart. When his mouth finds me, his lips press to my labia, and then he gives my clit a quick lick that has me gasping. I'm already wet, my body more than ready for him. I know he can smell it—my arousal thick in the air—and the way he groans tells me it's driving him wild. Then he's eating me like he's a starving man and I'm his last meal. His tongue plunges into me again and again, tasting everything I give. I can feel how much he wants me in every greedy stroke of his tongue.

He doesn't stop until my whole body is shaking, my legs barely holding me up.

Then he rises with a predatory grace, lifting me effortlessly. He slams me back into the wall, a growl rumbling low in his throat, resonating like a dark promise and a whispered threat. His hands grip my thighs and spread them wide, his touch demanding and possessive. He takes me—deep and slow, each movement deliberate and consuming, filling me until thought is a distant echo, movement an impossibility, until I am nothing but his and his alone.

I coil around him, clinging as if he is the only solid anchor in a world swirling with chaos. "Say it," he growls, each word punctuated by the rhythmic force of his body driving into mine. "Say you're mine."

"I'm yours," I whisper, my voice a breathless confession as my nails rake across his back, leaving trails of heat and desire. "I've always been yours."

His mouth finds the tender curve of my throat once more, and this time, he bites down with feral intensity. The pain is instantaneous—a sharp, searing flash of white—but beneath the surface, a pleasure ignites, burning hot, brutal, and achingly perfect. His teeth sink into the hollow of my neck, and I understand the gravity of this moment. What it signifies.

I cry out, my body convulsing around him as the bond snaps into existence, like a

chain forged in fire and tempered by longing. Something deep within me shatters, a fracture that feels like release. And yet, something else fuses together, sealing us irrevocably.

This is not magic. It is not a ritual. It is us—two souls claiming what has already been etched into our beings by blood, storm, and fire.

He pulls back, his lips glistening with the sheen of my blood, eyes ablaze with a wild, ravenous hunger that is tempered by an even more perilous emotion—devotion. My breath stutters in my chest, trapped like a frantic bird caught in a cage.

With a swift, unchecked surge of energy, I propel myself forward. My teeth sink into his shoulder with fierce, deliberate intensity—not to inflict harm, but to mark him with my presence, an imprint that cannot fade. I savor him deeply; the sharp tang of salt mingles with the searing warmth of his skin, and the raw, metallic essence of blood lingers on my tongue.

In that instant, we forge an indelible connection, an unspoken bond crystallizing between us. Words become superfluous. The understanding is implicit, unspoken, yet profoundly clear. He exhales a sharp gasp against my mouth, driving into me once more with a force that is both conclusive and earth-shattering. Together, we unravel, consumed in the most primal and profound union imaginable.

When it's over, we stay like that for a long moment—pressed to stone. Breathing hard. Still burning.

Lucas cups my jaw, forehead resting against mine. “You feel that?”

“Yeah.”

“That's forever.”

My throat's too tight to answer, so I nod. One hand curls around the back of his neck, grounding us both.

Outside the warded room, the mountain groans again.

The gate is still watching. But now? Now it's watching a mated pair.

The scent of him is still on me—smoke and blood and something wild I'll never have words for. The bite matches the ache between my thighs, only at my throat, a perfect echo of the mark I left on his shoulder. It throbs, not from pain, but from permanence. The claiming is done.

And it wasn't a ritual—at least not the kind Lina would have used. Not the way my father would have taught. This was ours.

Lucas pulls me close, slipping my sweater back over my head, his fingers dragging slowly across my bare skin, as if grounding himself with the contact. He doesn't speak, just leans in, breathing against my hair, hands resting heavy on my hips. There's no gentleness in him, but there's something steadier—fierce calm, like he's already made his choice and dares the world to question it.

Behind us, the chamber stays quiet. Kylie's breathing has evened out. Max and Oscar haven't spoken since we sealed the ward. The pulse of the gate has gone low and slow again, like it's waiting for something... or someone.

I lean into Lucas for one more beat, my hand over his heart. Then I pull away and we rejoin the others. Sleep drags me under before I even hit the ground. I don't remember curling onto the floor. Just the cold stone. His hand on my ankle. The sound of distant wind, humming like it's echoing through a long hallway I haven't seen yet.

And then?—

I'm dreaming.

But it doesn't feel like a dream.

The mountain's darker here. Hollow. Alive in the way old places sometimes are—full of things buried too deep to rot. I see her first—Lina—kneeling at the foot of the gate. Her arms are slick with blood, glyphs still glowing faintly, some carved into her skin so deep the muscle shines beneath. She's sobbing.

But not in pain.

It's rage.

She claws at her own chest, dragging her nails across old scars and whispering things that sound like prayers until her voice fractures. Cain stands behind her. Watching. Not speaking. His eyes are silver now. Wrong. Too still.

"Lina," I whisper.

She looks up—and it's my face.

Not similar. Not close.

Mine.

Hair streaked with sweat and blood. Eyes glowing too bright. Glyphs burned down my arms in curling, Windwoven script. The gate pulses behind me—her—once. Then twice.

And when she speaks, the voice is mine too.

“You’re already inside it.”

I scream.

I bolt upright with a choked gasp; the blanket sliding off me as my hands slam against the stone floor. My heart hammers in my chest like it’s trying to escape. Sweat stings my eyes. My skin burns everywhere Lucas touched me, every place he marked me, like the bond itself is reacting to something deeper—something twisted awake by my blood.

Lucas is beside me in an instant. His arms wrap around my shoulders, one hand going to the bite at my throat like he’s trying to feel if something’s wrong.

“What is it?” he asks.

“Lina,” I whisper. “She’s in my dreams again. But this time it wasn’t her. It was me.”

He freezes. “You saw yourself?”

I nod. “Same marks. Same glyphs. Same gate. But it wasn’t a memory. It was a warning.”

The silence that follows is thick. Pressing. I pull away from him and rise on shaky legs. My body aches, but it’s not the kind that comes from battle. This is something else—deeper. Resonating through bone and blood.

I walk to the edge of the chamber where the last circle of glyphs rings on the floor like a branded crown. My bare feet tingle as they cross the line, and when I kneel, I feel it—heat blooming against my palm as I hover over the outermost sigil.

Lucas joins me, crouching beside me, his hand resting on the back of my neck. “What are you sensing?”

“This glyph,” I whisper. “It shouldn’t be active. Not without a trigger.”

He leans closer, eyes scanning the lines of runes.

“It’s attuned,” I say.

“To what?”

I turn and meet his gaze. “Me.”

His jaw tightens. “Explain.”

I lift my hand, show him my palm. A faint red line glows under the skin—one I didn’t put there. “When she claimed the gate, she carved glyphs into her body. Into her blood. I think she anchored the outer rings to herself. But I don’t think that was the end of it.”

He stands slowly, crossing his arms. “You think she left a backup?”

“I think I am the backup.”

The weight of it hits hard, but it’s not new. It’s just confirmation. Every time the gate pulses, it feels like it’s reaching for me. Not because I’m Windrider. Not because I’m storm-marked. But because I’m both.

And because my father wasn’t trying to destroy Lina’s work—he was trying to stop it from finding me. I stand, blood roaring in my ears. The glyph ring around the chamber pulses once—just once—soft and dull.

Lucas watches me carefully, reading every shift in my posture, every flicker of emotion I try to keep off my face. “Say it,” he says.

I swallow hard. “They built it for me.”

Behind us, the gate thrums. And this time, it feels like it's waiting for permission.

CHAPTER 19

LUCAS

S ophia stands in the center of the glyph ring, her bare feet firmly planted on the earth as if she were a child of the storm itself. The wind whips around her, tousling her hair and tugging at the edges of her garments, but her stance remains unwavering. Her pulse is a steady drumbeat amid the chaos, yet I can sense the effort it takes to maintain such calm amidst the tempest.

A faint luminescence shimmers beneath her skin, barely perceptible at first but steadily intensifying, like the first light of dawn breaking through the night. The gate hums in response to her presence, attuning itself to the unique cadence of her blood, resonating with the echo of Lina's mark that she bears. A palpable tension crackles and dances in the surrounding air, charging it with energy.

I want to tear it down. Rip it apart with my teeth and make sure nothing ever touches her again. But that's not the play. Not yet.

"We go in together," I say, turning to face the others. Max stands near the wall, wiping the last of the blood from his blade. Kylie adjusts her bindings and mutters something under her breath about suicidal plans. Oscar reloads, silent as always. My eyes land on Sophia last. "But once we're inside, we follow the plan."

She looks at me questioningly. "Which part? The bait, the blood, or the part where you try to fry a semi-sentient gate with a lightning tantrum?"

I step in close. “The part where I use the storm you anchored to me to end this.”

Her mouth curves like she wants to argue, but she doesn’t. She nods instead, slow and sharp. “And if it doesn’t work?”

“Then I bury it. And whatever’s inside it.”

The others don’t flinch. They’ve seen enough to know I mean it. Sophia doesn’t flinch either. She’s learning. Or maybe remembering.

I lay the plan out fast and clear.

“The outer glyph ring is attuned to her,” I say, jerking my chin toward Sophia. “When she steps into it and bleeds, it’ll trigger the final sequence. That’s when the gate will flare—open, just a little. That’s the window. I’ll feed my power into it. It’ll think it’s being answered. If I can push enough current into the anchor line, the feedback will flare every active sigil.”

Kylie whistles low. “And we just... what? Ride it out?”

“No,” I say. “You and Max destroy the anchor sigils the second they glow. You’ll know them. They’ll be tied to her blood and mine. Anything that responds when the surge hits? Kill it.”

Oscar looks up. “And if something comes through?”

I meet his gaze dead-on. “We kill that too.”

Sophia crosses her arms. “You’re putting your soul in its hands, Lucas.”

“No,” I say, stepping toward her. “I’m putting mine in yours.”

She doesn't blink. Just reaches for the knife at her thigh and nods. "Then let's give the gate a show."

The chamber appears transformed this time. It feels colder, as if the chill has seeped into the very walls, and hungrier, as though it has developed an insatiable desire.

At the center of the dais, the shattered windglass has partially reformed—not fully restored, but enough to resemble the shape of a door. Behind it, the pulse is steady now, a rhythmic throb that has replaced the previous erratic surges and unpredictable spikes. It waits expectantly... for her.

Together, we move as a single entity down the shadowy corridor, where glyphs illuminate beneath our feet in lazy, spiraling paths, casting a warm glow that seems to welcome us back with familiarity.

Kylie is the first to break away from the group, her footsteps echoing softly as she heads toward the eastern ring to set her charges with precision. Max veers off to the west, his movements purposeful and calculated. Meanwhile, Oscar stands vigil at the entry point, his blade hanging loosely at his side, ready yet relaxed, as if he is a sentinel guarding the threshold.

Sophia walks alongside me, her steps as silent as a whisper in the night. Her hand brushes against mine just once, a brief and fleeting touch, then it's gone. Yet that moment is enough. Her scent envelops me, a mix of storm and heat, anchoring me to this moment. She is claimed. She is mine.

I have an overwhelming urge to seize her hand and flee, to whisk her away from this place and bury the entire mountain beneath us. But I resist. We must stay, must see this through if we want to bring an end to it all. With determination, she steps into the ring of glyphs, and the stone beneath her feet springs to life.

The air around us pulls taut, charged with anticipation. Glyphs along the outermost circle ignite in succession, each one flaring to life in a perfect, mesmerizing spiral. The sharp scent of ozone intensifies, mingling with the tension in the air. Beyond the windglass, something stirs—slow and sinuous, as if testing the limits of its reach with a deliberate grace.

I raise my hands to the heavens, summoning the storm. It responds with a deep, pulsing rumble that resonates beneath my skin. I feel its power coiling within my chest, winding through my limbs like a living force, ready to be unleashed.

Sophia draws her knife, moving to my side as the others file out. She doesn't speak right away, just threads her fingers through mine like she's anchoring herself with the contact. I stop her before the corridor and pull her close.

“Ready? This doesn't happen without you,” I murmur. “You do this, we end it. We break Lina's chain.”

Her voice is tight but steady. “And if it takes me with it?”

I tilt her chin until her eyes meet mine. “It won't. I won't let it.”

Her lips part like she wants to argue. I cut her off with a kiss—not soft, not slow. Final. Possessive. She leans into it like she needs the taste of me to steady her next step. She is afraid. She knows what I'm asking her to risk... so do I.

The gate pulses once as we enter, like it recognizes us. No creatures come forward this time. No malformed hybrids. Just silence.

She draws the blade across her palm with a deliberate, steady motion. As the sharp edge slices her skin, crimson droplets begin to trickle and fall to the ground, leaving a small, dark trail.

The gate responds immediately, almost as if it has a life of its own. The ornate windglass set into the structure bursts with a blinding radiance, its light so intense it forces eyes to squint or turn away. The very earth beneath our feet trembles with a deep, rumbling vibration, while the air around us transforms, becoming frigid and sharp, biting at exposed skin like a winter gale.

And then she materializes. In the midst of the intricate glyph rings that encircle the space, standing between us and the ominous gate, is Lina.

This is no mere vision or fleeting memory; she stands before us, as real as the chill in the air—though not entirely whole. Her form wavers and shifts, trapped in a strange state of half-spirit, half-solid existence. Black runes etched into her skin in an eerie pattern adorn her body, crawling like living leeches. Her eyes burn with an inner fire, molten and intense, and her hair cascades down in wild, unruly tendrils, a chaotic mix of blood-red strands and the unruly gusts of a tempest.

Sophia freezes. Her hand tightens around the blade.

Lina turns. Her mouth curves.

“You came,” she says, and her voice is wind and venom. “The gate chose well.”

I step in front of Sophia, stormlight burning at my palms. “You don’t speak to her.”

Lina’s gaze slides over me. “Still trying to protect what’s already mine?”

“You didn’t mark her. I did.”

Lina smiles. “You marked a vessel. The gate marked an heir.”

Sophia moves beside me, shoulders squared. “You don’t get to decide who I am.”

Lina cocks her head. “Don’t I? You were always meant for more than being Windrider, child. More than stormborn. You were meant to be eternal.”

Sophia doesn’t answer.

Lina steps closer. She’s not walking. She’s gliding—just above the glyphs. “Your father feared this. That’s why he buried the blade. Why he tried to burn the maps.”

I flare the storm again, a warning. The light cracks across the stone.

Lina doesn’t blink.

“Feed it,” she whispers. “The gate hungers. It sings for your blood, your bond. Give it what it wants, and it will give you everything.”

Sophia’s voice is like steel. “You don’t know what I want.”

“I know what you were born to be.”

Sophia steps forward with determination. Her blood drips steadily onto the intricate glyphs etched into the ground, each drop sparking with energy. The light flares brilliantly, casting vibrant reflections across the clearing. Lina flickers in and out of view, her presence a wavering silhouette against the sudden illumination.

That’s the signal. I raise both hands, feeling the power surge through me. The storm detonates outward, a force of nature unleashed. Mist erupts from my skin, swirling around me in a tempest of silver and shadow, racing along the glyph lines like a living entity. The gate pulses with a deep, resonant thud—just once—before the anchor sigils ignite with an ethereal glow.

Now.

Kylie and Max become blurs of motion, their movements swift and precise. Glyph by glyph, sigil by sigil, they methodically set them ablaze. Stone crumbles beneath their touch, disintegrating into dust. Light shatters like glass, scattering into a thousand radiant fragments.

Lina screams—a piercing, high-pitched sound—her form disintegrating at the edges, unraveling like a tapestry caught in a violent wind.

Sophia strides into the heart of the ring. The windglass hums with a resonant frequency, vibrating as if alive. I move toward her, the stormlight still cascading from my body in a relentless torrent. Lina reaches out, desperation in her eyes, her mouth open in a silent plea.

I strike.

The wind surges forward, engulfing her. Not completely. Not forever, but enough to diminish her presence. She vanishes in a swirling burst of mist, her form dissipating into nothingness. And the gate—the gate begins to close, its ancient mechanisms grinding to a halt, sealing the way with finality.

Stone shatters, sending jagged shards flying as the mountain lets out a thunderous groan, echoing through the cavern like a beast in agony. I seize Sophia with urgency and yank her back with all my strength. “Now!” I bellow over the din. Max and Kylie stand poised at the tunnel entrance, weapons raised and eyes scanning the chaos. Oscar grips Sophia’s other arm, pulling with a fierce urgency that matches the situation.

The chamber erupts into a deafening roar as it splits apart, the sound like a thousand storms unleashed at once. Ancient glyphs etched into the walls ignite in a dazzling flare, blazing for a heartbeat before extinguishing into darkness. The final ring explodes in a searing flash of white-hot light so intense it burns our retinas, leaving

spots dancing in our vision.

Fueled by desperation, we sprint, each step a frantic plea for survival. Behind us, rocks crash down with relentless fury, the ceiling beam collapsing with a resounding smash that sends debris flying in a lethal rain. The rhythmic pulse of the gate has ceased, a harbinger of the mountain's doom as its foundations crumble into oblivion.

"Faster!" I scream, shoving Kylie ahead with all the force I can muster. Sophia staggers beside me, her energy drained, a crimson trail trickling steadily from her palm. I catch her just before she crumples, holding her steady. "I've got you," I assure her with conviction.

She nods, speechless, each breath a ragged gasp. The corridor behind us collapses with a terrifying rumble, swallowing the path we had just traversed.

"Light—daylight up here!" Max shouts from ahead, his voice laced with urgency and hope.

We don't pause for a second. The ground begins to crumble beneath my feet as I lunge forward, dragging Sophia with me. We burst into the outer corridor, where the ancient walls splinter and crack like fragile bones beneath a great weight.

Oscar drops his pack, flinging the outer door open with a wild yank. Sunlight floods in, a brilliant cascade of warmth and life. We hurtle into it, gasping for air, our hearts pounding in unison with the chaos left behind.

The mountain lets out a final, earth-shaking roar—a sound of ultimate surrender—and then the gate chamber is no more. Utterly gone, buried beneath an avalanche of rock, blood, and the horrors we refused to unleash.

I drop to my knees in the frost-dusted grass outside the ruins, Sophia pressed against

my chest. She's breathing. Barely. But she's breathing.

Max crouches nearby, one hand over his heart like he just remembered it's still beating. Kylie slumps beside Oscar, blade still in her lap.

The air is quiet.

Then Sophia lifts her head. Her eyes find mine. "I think... we won," she says with a grin.

I nod once. "I believe you may be right."

She closes her eyes. Her voice is so soft I almost miss it. "But it's not over."

And I know she's right. Not yet.

CHAPTER 20

SOPHIA

We crawl from the wreckage like survivors of something ancient, some long-buried myth clawed loose from stone and blood. The mountain behind us groans once, twice—and then dies. Whatever lived inside it, whatever power Lina tried to bind to this world, is gone. Sealed. Shattered. Swallowed by rock and fury and everything we were willing to become to end it.

I don't look back.

Lucas hauls me up over the last ridge. His grip on my arm is steady, his jaw clenched tight like it always is when the worst part is over, but his instincts haven't let go of the fight yet. He doesn't ask if I'm okay. He knows I'm not. That none of us are.

Kylie's limping but upright. Dried blood smears Max; his eyes are too wide, too quiet. Oscar's the only one who doesn't look like hell, but even he keeps glancing back at the wrecked path like he's expecting it to breathe again.

It doesn't.

We hit the tree line by midmorning. The sky's the kind of clear that feels earned—cold, high, painfully blue. Somewhere behind us, the gate's ruins are already being buried by frost. The glyphs are gone. The hum is gone. Lina is gone.

But Cain's body isn't there. We all saw the chamber collapse. Felt the mountain

shudder and close its throat around what remained.

Still. There's no sign of him. No blood. No bones. Nothing.

And he's not the only loose thread. The Crimson Claw is still out there, and I doubt Lina had anything to do with the declining birth rate. I'm surrounded by loose threads—ones I need to pull to solve the puzzle of what's going on, but that will have to wait for another day.

The walk back to the lodge is a blur. I know we're moving. I know Lucas is there, always to my left, matching his steps to mine even when I stagger or slow. But it's like walking through water, every thought thick and off-kilter.

The Nightshade perimeter scouts spot us first. Then come the alerts, the rushing footsteps, the sudden flurry of movement as we reach the lodge and are ushered inside, wrapped in blankets, handed food none of us can eat.

I think I sit. I think someone takes my pulse.

I don't remember speaking. Don't remember much at all until Ryder's voice cuts through the noise.

"Where's Cain?"

Lucas stands behind me, arms crossed. His voice is ice. "Gone."

Isabella appears beside him, her brow furrowing. "And Lina?"

My lips part. I start to answer. Lucas beats me to it.

"Gone," he says again.

They ask about the gate. About the glyphs. About the ruins. I see the council elders leaning forward, Ironclaw's patriarch sharpening a pen on the edge of the table like he's ready to transcribe history.

Lucas looks down at me. I shake my head once. We say nothing.

The official report will say what it always does—monsters stopped, danger averted, threat neutralized. No one needs to know that the bond Lucas and I share nearly opened the very thing they sent us to stop. No one needs to hear about what it took to destroy Lina. What it cost.

They didn't carry the storm. We did.

Night falls slow and heavy over the Nightshade Pack. Wolves move through the halls in hushed groups, murmuring to each other like they're not sure yet if it's safe to celebrate or if another disaster will claw its way out of the trees.

In the courtyard, someone builds a fire. I watch it through the window of Lucas's room, arms wrapped around my knees. I haven't spoken since we got back. I don't know if I can.

He's cleaned up now—bandaged, dressed, his hair still damp from a shower he only agreed to take after I shoved him into it. But his eyes haven't softened. They're still watching for something. Still tracking ghosts that might crawl out of the cracks we didn't seal all the way.

I touch the hollow of my throat—the place he bit me. The mark is still there. Raised. Warm. Mine.

No one's asked about it. But the Nightshade wolves smell it. Feel it. When I pass them in the hallway, they glance at it and smile at me. They're glad for their beta...

for me too, I think.

Eventually, the lodge grows quieter. The elders retreat to their rooms, council members drifting off in packs of two and three. Ryder catches my eye once across the hall, gives me a nod. He doesn't try to speak. Doesn't need to.

He knows what we did. He helped build the plan that worked. He was willing to stand behind us if it failed. That's enough.

By the time I climb the spiral stairs to the observatory, the mountain wind has picked up again. The storm's rolling in across the peaks—low, fast, and curling with a violet mist that glows faintly against the night.

I press my forehead to the glass, watching the clouds pour over the cliffs like a tide. It's not magic this time. Not calling me. Just weather. Beautiful and brutal and true.

A door opens behind me. Soft footfalls. No scent—Lucas never carries one long. Not when he burns it off in the storm. He doesn't speak. Just steps up behind me and rests his forehead against my back, both arms circling my waist like he's holding in more than words.

I lean into him, fingers tracing slow patterns on his forearm. We don't talk. We don't need to. I feel him breathing. I feel him there. For the first time in what feels like days, I close my eyes.

"I love you," I manage to murmur.

I can't see his smile, but I can feel it as he presses a kiss to the nape of my neck. "I love you too."

Pushing away from him, I turn and press a kiss to his lips before making my way

down to the library at Nightshade Lodge, which still smells like blood and old books. Someone tried to air it out with dried juniper bundles and a pot of spiced tea left forgotten on the hearth, but no one's fooled. The mountain may have fallen, the gate may be buried, but something deeper still haunts this place.

I stand by the window, the bite at my throat throbbing like a slow drumbeat. The rain outside is steady now—calm, for the first time in weeks. The storm broke last night and left the sky purged but watchful.

Behind me, the door creaks open. I don't have to turn. I know that scent. Sun-warmed parchment and the high-altitude snap of alpine pine.

"Hello, Father," I say without looking.

His steps are soft across the rug. He was always careful in his approach, never abrupt. That's how Windriders move. Measured. Like fate is a dance they choreograph in advance.

"You look... different," he says.

"I am."

He moves closer. I still don't turn. If I look at him, I might remember too much. The way he smiled at me when I first bent a storm to my will. The day he buried my mother's warding ring in the hollow tree and said some things are too dangerous to carry.

"You survived," he says, voice gentle. "And more than that... you succeeded."

There's something like awe in his voice. It makes my shoulders tense.

“Lina is gone. The gate is closed. The threat is over. For now,” I reply. “You’re not here to congratulate me. Say what you came to say.”

He sighs. “Sophia. The Windriders need you. You saw the fault lines in the old glyph structures. You’ve walked through what none of us ever dared approach. With your power... your bloodline... we could rebuild. Stronger. Wiser.”

I turn. He flinches—not visibly, not for anyone else—but I see it. The way his gaze flicks to the mark at my throat. He stares at me like he can’t quite recognize what I’ve become.

“I’m not coming back,” I say quietly.

“This is your legacy?—”

“No. It was yours. And you tried to protect it by locking it in tradition and half-truths. You taught me how to wield the wind, Father. But you never taught me how to stand against it.” He says nothing. I step closer, my voice steady. “The wind doesn’t lead me anymore. I do.”

My father’s eyes are older than I remember.

“You were never meant to be bound to one place,” he says. “We trained you to walk between the lines. Not burn through them.”

I let the silence stretch between us. Then I smile. “Then it’s good I learned how to burn.”

Lucas appears in the doorway. He doesn’t speak. Just watches—his expression unreadable. But I feel the fury simmering beneath his skin. Not jealousy. Not possessiveness. Just a relentless instinct to protect.

He doesn't have to. Not this time.

"I choose Nightshade," I say. "I choose my pack. I choose the man who stood beside me when the mountain tried to swallow us whole."

"You could be so much more..."

"I am. And it's not because of what you gave me. It's because of what I took back." I nod toward the door. "You can go."

My father hesitates, then bows. It's stiff. Formal. A recognition, not a reconciliation. I think that's all we'll ever get. Before he steps through the door, he glances at Lucas.

"She wasn't meant for you," he says.

Lucas doesn't blink. "No. She was meant for herself. She just chose me anyway."

That ends it. My father leaves in silence.

Lucas steps in and closes the door behind him, then walks straight to me. No fanfare. No questions. I reach for his hand.

"Was that hard?" he asks.

"Yes," I admit. "But not for the reasons he thinks."

He doesn't push. Just pulls me into his chest and holds me there. His chin rests on top of my head. My arms circle his waist. We stay like that, breathing together.

The storm is gone outside. But not from us. Never from us.

He kisses the bite at my throat. “We’re still standing.”

I smile into his shirt. “For now.”

He pulls back, looks down at me. “Want to take a walk?”

“In the rain?”

He raises an eyebrow. “Afraid of getting wet?”

I laugh, soft and sharp. “Lead the way.”

He doesn’t take my hand. He clasps my wrist, firm, warm, guiding me with a confidence that never pretends to be gentle.

Outside, the grass is slick. The storm left puddles in the gravel path, and the air is damp with leftover rain. Nightshade wolves move through the camp with a strange quiet—like they know the worst is over but haven’t decided what comes next.

I don’t care. Not right now. Lucas and I walk to the edge of the ridge where the trees part, revealing the mountains in the distance. Broken peaks. Collapsed stone. And somewhere beneath it all, what’s left of the gate.

He stands behind me, arms circling my waist, and I lean into him like he’s the center of gravity I never knew I needed.

Thunder rumbles again, low and distant.

“It’s coming back,” I say.

He nods. “It always does.”

“Do we run?”

“No.”

I tilt my head back until I can look at him. “Why not?”

He smiles, slow and sure. “Because now... we are the storm.”

The first drop hits my cheek. Then another. I laugh. Not because it’s funny, but because it’s true.

Lucas steps out first. I follow. The rain falls harder, soaking through our clothes, our hair, our skin. We don’t flinch. We don’t hide. We walk straight into it—together.

And this time, the storm doesn’t chase us, it walks beside us.

MAX

I smell her before I see her. Not the pine and ozone of Windrider glyph dust. Not the steel-and-ash of battle. Just her—crushed cedar. Burnt sugar. And something sharp underneath, like lightning cut through stormwood.

Kylie.

My jaw clenches as I round the corner of the Ironclaw lodge and find her standing in the middle of the armory. Boots propped on a crate of ammunition, arms crossed over her chest like she owns the place—and like she might blow it up just to make a point.

“What the hell are you doing here?” I growl.

She doesn’t jump. Doesn’t even blink. Just tilts her head, eyes still the same eerie green that used to see through every damn excuse I gave her. “You’re welcome, by the way.”

“For what?” I stalk toward her, every muscle coiled and ready. “Breaking into Ironclaw territory uninvited?”

She flashes that maddening grin. The one that used to undo me when I was smart enough to fear her and dumb enough to love her, anyway. “Didn’t break in. The scouts on patrol let me through. I told them I was your problem... they believed me.”

“I’ll bet. And you are right; you are a problem, although you made it clear you weren’t mine.” I stop three feet away. Close enough to smell the heat on her skin.

Too close. “I’m still waiting for the part where I’m supposed to say thank you.”

She uncrosses her arms and hops down from the crate like we’re back on familiar ground—where we met; where we fought; where she left me. Maybe we are. Maybe we never left it.

“Two things,” she says, ticking them off with her fingers. “One—Ironclaw’s got a rogue signal pulsing off your southern border. Something nasty, glyph-warped and moving like it doesn’t care who’s watching. Two—I’m the only one who’s tracked it and lived.”

“And you came back to warn me out of the goodness of your heart?” I don’t believe it for a second.

“No.” Her voice drops. “I came because whatever this thing is... it used to be Windrider.”

My blood goes cold. Windrider constructs are rare. Illegal. The kind of magic your average glyph caster doesn’t survive. If something like that’s running loose near Ironclaw territory, it means only one thing... we’re not done with the gate.

I rake a hand through my hair and look away, giving myself a breath to process. That’s all I can afford. One breath. Because the second I let her back in, I know how this ends. Same way it did last time.

Burned down and broken open. But she steps closer, like she knows I’m about to shut her out and she’s not letting it happen.

“You want me gone?” she asks.

“Yes.”

“Liar.”

I grab her wrist before I think better of it. She gasps, not in surprise—but in recognition. We both remember exactly what this feels like.

“Last time I touched you like this,” I say low, “you ran.”

“Last time you touched me like this,” she breathes, “you told me to go.”

I pull her in. Hard. Until our bodies are flush, and her scent is the only thing I can breathe. My hand finds the back of her neck, thumb grazing the spot where I once kissed her until she forgot her own name.

“I didn’t mean it.”

Her eyes soften for half a second—just long enough for the damage to be done. Then she’s shoving me back.

“Too late for apologies,” she snaps.

“Good.” I crowd her again. “I’m not here to offer one.”

“No. You’re here to play warrior in a territory that’s falling apart, while pretending it doesn’t kill you I walked out.”

“I let you go.”

“You pushed me.”

“Because you wouldn’t have stayed—Windriders don’t stay.”

She swallows, throat working. For a second, there’s silence. Just the hum of the old

ward crystals and the quiet scrape of her boot across stone.

Then, soft and sharp: “Sophia stayed for Lucas. I would’ve stayed for you.”

I close the distance in one move and press her against the wall, arms braced on either side of her head. Her breath catches, and I feel her chest rise against mine.

“You want the truth, Kylie?” I whisper against her temple. “I never stopped thinking about you. Never stopped wanting you. You’ve been under my skin since the moment you drew your first blood ward in my training yard and told my second-in-command to go fuck himself.”

Her pulse stutters under my hand.

I trail my fingers down her side, slow and firm, and her lashes flutter.

“You talk like you don’t want me,” I murmur, “but you came here smelling like thunder. And you only smell like that when you’re ready to burn.”

Her head tilts back against the stone, lips parted. “And if I burn?”

“Then I make damn sure you burn for me.”

She fists my shirt and drags me down into her. The kiss is all bite and punishment—no give, no mercy. Just months and months of what if and why not and fuck you for not choosing me when it mattered.

But it’s her moan that does me in—low, desperate, unshielded.

I scoop her up, turn, and slam her down on the table like I’ve done this a hundred times in dreams I’ll never admit to. Her legs wrap around my waist. My hand finds the hem of her shirt. When I pull it up, she arches into me like she’s waited every

night since that battle for this exact moment.

I kiss her neck. Hard.

"Say the word, and I'll stop," I whisper fiercely, my voice a fervent plea to whatever unseen forces rule this world, praying desperately that she won't utter it.

She remains silent, her eyes blazing with determination as her fingers expertly unfasten my belt with a swift motion that ignites a raging wildfire in my veins.

"You stop now," she rasps, her voice a fierce vow, "and I'll carve a glyph into your chest that won't heal for a year."

"Gods, I missed your threats," I murmur, a potent blend of nostalgia and desire swirling in my chest.

Her hands seize me with a fervor that burns, unyielding, while mine explore her with equal intensity. It's a storm of chaos, hunger, and old fury, all merging into something infinitely larger. She gasps as I thrust in; her nails digging into my back, leaving searing trails as her legs lock around me with a desperation that screams of fear I might vanish again.

But there's no chance of that.

I claim her with a raw intensity, as if engraving this moment into memory, determined to eclipse every detail of the last time. Beneath me, she's a wild tempest, every thrust met with a bite, a scrape, a cry that sends electric shocks racing down my spine.

"You think you're still angry," I growl, my voice rough with exertion, "but your body doesn't lie."

Her hand tangles in my hair, yanking my head back as she grins, a wicked glint in her eyes. "Neither does yours."

I curse against her throat, feeling her tighten around me, each pulse a wave of sensation. Her voice breaks on a groan of my name, leaving us both shattered and breathless in the aftermath.

Later, when we're both catching our breath and the heat between us has shifted from wildfire to a low, steady burn, she sits up on the edge of the table and cups my jaw.

"You know this changes nothing, right?" she says like she means it.

"You can keep telling yourself that, but this time I'll prove you wrong."

I mean it. Even if I have to keep her bound to me physically for the rest of our lives. I lean in and kiss her once—slow and final.

Because the thing about Windriders? They always come back to the storm, and my time at the gate taught me many things... among them, I am the storm.

Max and Kylie will return later this year.