



My Hexed Honeymoon (The Bridgewater Pack #2)

Author: *Cindi Madsen*

Category: Fantasy

Description: A forced marriage. A dangerous mission. An attraction neither can resist.

Talia never wanted to wed werewolf, Diego, and the newly-appointed alpha certainly never wanted a witch for a mate—especially not one who hexed his pack. But fate, a growing supernatural resurgence, and an unbreakable contract have bound them together in an arranged marriage neither can escape.

Their honeymoon is off to a terrible start—spell-bound vows, a stipulation requiring an heir bred with both magic and the ability to shift, and a mate bond neither of them wants. Not to mention the vampire envoy that arrives and issues an ultimatum. They want the Moonstone Blade, and only Talia can navigate the astral plane known as the Hollow to find it.

To avoid war, Diego must help his new bride harness the magic he despises and retrieve the weapon. But with all the dark forces at play, the biggest danger isn't whether Talia and Diego will kill each other or give into the fire between them. If they don't learn to trust each other, the Hollow's dark magic will consume them, along with the bond they thought they didn't want.

Total Pages (Source): 36

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:09 am

CHAPTER ONE

You ever have one of those weeks that just won't stop?

A week that kicks your ass so thoroughly that you find yourself at the end of a rose-petal-strewn aisle, beneath an altar made up of a crescent moon and a pentagram, about to marry a werewolf?

Talk about an unholy union.

Given the brooding, seething mutt across from me, it'll be a union filled with howling, growling, and gnashing of teeth.

Which is fine by me, because I want to bite Diego De la Cruz right back.

I'll admit that when the beautiful man with bronze skin, dark hair and scruff, and dimples for days shouted his objections before the ceremony had even begun, a dangerous amount of hope beckoned. For a moment, I wondered if Prince Charming truly did exist.

But the hulking hottie ended up being nothing more than some neanderthal on a power trip.

Now I'm in the exact spot I was earlier, betrothed to an alpha werewolf, desperately searching for a way out.

It's not like I longed to return to Mommy Dearest's coven of like-minded witches.

While the werewolves started this battle, my mother and the Ironwood Coven she aligned us with had been merciless when they'd gone after the Bridgewater Pack.

From there, an alliance had been forged, and lucky me, I got to be the pawn.

At the beginning of the ceremony, a werewolf named Conall Shaw had been my groom-to-be. While he was in love with a human, I figured that'd only make our marriage of alliance easier. But mere minutes before the exchanging of our vows, Diego challenged the former alpha for the number one spot.

The fight had burrowed a trail through the forest.

At the end of the literal fight for top dog, Diego De la Cruz came out on top, and Conall, no longer alpha of the pack, could be with woman he loved.

Now I'm back where I started the evening, draped in white and standing beneath a wedding altar, my breath growing shallow as the weight of the spellbound vows we're about to exchange bears down on me.

That's the thing about ceremonies involving magic: following through isn't so much optional as vital to prolonging your life. The fidelity clause had claws, and as the officiant began his spiel, I swore I felt them digging into my churning gut.

As much as I'd acted like I didn't care if the spell on the local veterinarian took her out or not, guilt plagued me over everything my mother had done to the woman the last alpha had fallen in love with. And yes, I'd been involved in her kidnapping, although it was under duress.

Most everything I've done for as long as I can remember has been under duress.

But there was being sorry for the part I played, and then there was binding my life to

the tuxedoed werewolf across from me.

Resentment thickens the air between us, tension coiling like a snake ready to strike.

Using the special power I was gifted with, I reach out with my astral senses, feeling for the spark of every creature and plant in the forest. Birds, bunnies, a chipmunk family...

There, far enough it's barely a glimmer, an Eastern hognose snake.

Not that I should be entertaining the idea of persuading a snake to slither on over and dig its fangs into my betrothed, who's wrinkling his nose over being asked if he'll take me, to have and to hold.

"...until your bloodline unites both caster and beast, ensuring the safety of both species for generations to come."

Sure. A witchy werewolf is all that's missing when it comes to convincing two species who've hated each other for centuries to get along.

I get it, though, why Mother forced the deal. We're a dying breed, hunted by both werewolf and vampire alike. I'd go on a rant about the role misogyny played, but I really should save something for the honeymoon, you know?

A strong breeze rustles through the pines, swirling the veil atop my blond curls as the witch marrying us details bargains made in blood. My fingers tighten around the bouquet I hold, the stems creaking under the pressure and releasing an evergreen scent I long to follow to another plane entirely.

This is it. The moment I say yes and become a glorified breed mate.

Anger sings through my veins and simmers my blood. I can't get over what a fucking hypocrite my mother is, raising me to come into power and then stripping me of my freedom and my future to serve her purposes.

Across from me, Diego stands firm, a fortress of chiseled strength. His broad shoulders are squared beneath inky black lapels, sharp jaw locked in place like he's facing his execution.

Yeah, me too, buddy. I'd rather go find that snake to play with than spend a single evening with you.

Heat darts through me as my gaze catches on his hands, flexing and relaxing at his side. His knuckles are slightly raw from his earlier brawl, and something about the bloody, ragged skin has me imagining him putting those destructive hands on me—but in the name of pleasure, not pain.

Fine. Maybe one evening wouldn't be so bad.

His golden-brown skin catches the late afternoon light while deep-set, blackest of brown eyes watch me with guarded detachment. His onyx hair is neatly styled, but a rebellious strand curls onto his forehead, a betrayal of the control he so desperately clings to.

Anyway, that's what I've picked up on about my groom during these past twenty or so minutes I've known him.

While Diego technically won the physical battle against his best friend and former alpha, Conall, he appears a bit lost. Like a puppy who's bit off more than he can chew but forced to finish the meal anyway.

If I wasn't too fixated on watching the light go out of my own life, I might've pitied

him—actually pitied a mangy werewolf who thinks brute force is what makes him the toughest.

Sadly, it's a sentiment my mother shared. Brains would conquer brawn in the right situation; I just needed to figure out what that situation was and find it.

Any other evening, maybe I could have a chuckle over the irony.

Here we stand, a witch and a werewolf, picture perfect from a distance.

But zoom in, and we're a reluctant bride and a shifty groom, shackled by duty and magic. Not celebrating a beginning but mourning a chance at finding a partner who truly loves and cherishes us. A partner who'll make the cruel world feel a little less lonely.

"I will," Diego says, and my heart hammers harder in my chest. Are we already to the part where we say I do?

I've always loved that part of supernatural ceremonies. We're not saying "I do" in the present tense, but "I will" in the sense we're promising forever.

Forever. The word echoes through my head like a resounding gong while my gut drops down to the bejeweled heels on my feet. Amethysts, garnets, sapphires, and emeralds wink in the twinkling lights, each of them a reminder that this union serves a mystical purpose.

The bell sleeves of my dress billow around me with every little nervous shift, constantly drawing focus to the antique lace that truly is strikingly beautiful. Flowers are woven through my hair, each of them given to me by one of my coven sisters.

Dressed like the princess I am, a doll improperly trained to do the evil queen's

bidding.

If I refuse, that evil queen who masqueraded as my mother would make an example out of me, and the human veterinarian dies.

Bitterness wells within me, caustic and soul-destroying. While she'll use my empathy to coerce me into this marriage, she also views it as a weakness, and I'm so sick of losing on every single side.

“Natalia Burroughs of the Oldenwilde Clan, will you take Diego De la Cruz, alpha of the Bridgewater Pack, to be your fated mate, bound by moon and magic, till your souls depart this realm?”

If I agree to the outlined terms, I surrender myself to a man who sees me as nothing more than a breed mate. A means to an end and an oven to put a bun in. Ew.

Pinpricks of pain fire up the back of my neck. Mother's glare, with a side of witchcraft. I don't have to look at her spot in the front row to know she's glowering, willing me into compliance. Her oppressive presence has cast a shadow over my entire life, extra shady and inescapable.

No one crossed Andromeda, High Priestess of the Oldenwilde Coven. She'd orchestrated this entire arrangement and, as she reminded me countless times through the years, will absolutely not tolerate defiance.

A cold sweat breaks out, fear sending chill bumps up and down my spine. I've fought her before, and it never ends well. Every attempt to push back was met with biting magic and crushing consequences. I was always too soft, too weak. That's what she'd told me over and over again.

And now, here I am, proving her right. I don't know what terrifies me more—this life

I never wanted, or the fact that I'm too afraid to fight for a different one.

Maybe it won't be so bad. After all, being bargained and bred to the werewolf gets me out from under her thumb.

If only it didn't feel like just another cage, one without a door.

But if Diego De la Cruz can power through and vow himself to me despite the permanently disgusted look on his face, I suppose I can do the same to him.

The officiant raises an eyebrow at me, waiting. The spell-bound contract hovers in the air, sparking with shimmering magic that's eager to seal my fate.

"I will," I say, inhaling sharply at the dizzying current that ripples through the air and gives me a jolt.

Something about it causes the glowing, astral threads that weave the fabric of the universe to blink out like an overpowered breaker that needs to be reset.

Pressure builds and pops in my head, and then my astral power's returned to me, the lifeforce that connects us all flickering to life before me once again, even stronger than before.

It's slightly dizzying, the rush of blood and the glittering auras of too many people and creatures hitting me at once.

Something's wrong. Off somehow.

The golden threads are vibrating like a fly caught in a spider's web, alerting me that my domain's been invaded by an excess of supernatural creatures when I'm already painfully aware.

“You may now kiss the bride,” our officiant announces, and I narrow my eyes and glare at my groom, almost daring him to try.

Then all those golden threads twang, playing a discordant chord that threatens to ruin the harmony of the rest of the world.

At the same time, Diego’s posture stiffens, his nostrils flaring as he scents the air. All of the shifters are fidgeting and perking up noses and ears, the movement strangely canine even in human form.

My groom’s eyes dart toward the trees, his posture shifting from funereal to predatory.

Andromeda’s spine shoots stick straight, her long nails that she sharpens into talons digging into her silk-clad thighs.

Her aura blinks, her fear filtering into it like a cloud of smoke.

It billows to me, seeing my mother truly afraid in a way she rarely is, and chokes the air from my lungs. If the woman who’s orchestrated ghastly horrors in the name of power is scared, what does that mean for the rest of us?

It’s then I feel the icy cool wrongness, the way the golden fibers of the astral plane shrink away from the abyss of space left by the undead. The murmurs from the uneasy crowd ripple through the meadow in a wave, witches and wolves alike sensing the disturbance in their own way.

Emerging from the forest’s depths, individual shapes begin to peel away from the tree line and step into the grassy clearing.

Great. As if marrying a werewolf wasn’t bad enough, we have wedding crashers, and

they're the type who don't come to party but for a blood bath.

The word rustles through the crowd like a leaf on the breeze, panic and anger edging the voices and striking fear into my soul.

Vampires.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:09 am

CHAPTER TWO

Yeah, that tracks.

I've been alpha of the Bridgewater Pack for less than two hours and fucking vampires are traipsing through my forest.

While I'd love to claim that challenging Conall for the alpha position was completely altruistic, the truth is, I've craved the power and control that comes along with the position.

Especially once he began dating the human, a big no-no in our world, whether you ask our pack members or the Grand Werewolf Council.

But I'd also seen the bond between him and Kerrigan. And it was the type of love that left my best friend willing to move mountains.

Willing to submit to me to secure a future with the veterinarian.

That type of love was all well and good for others, but I knew it wasn't for me. I'd rather be completely in control of my senses and emotions, thank-you-very-much.

What I hadn't expected was for the mantle that came along with being alpha to slam into me like a freight train. It hit harder than Conall, harder than our training sessions, harder than anything I've ever experienced in my life.

The weight of everything that's suddenly become my responsibility presses into my

spine, coiling chains around my chest like they mean to drag me under.

The safety of my pack rests on me now, and as I stare at the enshrouded witch I've just bound myself to, all I can think about is how much I already regret marrying Natalia Burroughs.

It's nothing more than a means to an end; An alliance forged for my people.

If I didn't know better—if I didn't hate her on instinct after what she and her kind had done—I might've thought she was beautiful.

Might have let my gaze linger on the white netting covering the golden curls that tumble over her shoulders and the defiant way her chin tilted up during the vows, as if daring me to be the one who said no.

But I do know better, and I'll never let myself forget that not only did she and her mother kidnap Kerrigan and threaten our entire pack, but witches also murdered my family.

Conall's too. Back when we were barely old enough to understand what death meant, and the harsh reality left us with eternal scars.

The only reason we survived the brutal attack was because we hid. I've spent every day since regretting that I wasn't stronger. Thinking that I should've fought despite being outmatched and outnumbered. Wishing I could've done something—anything.

Now I've sworn a supernatural oath to one of the deceitful creatures who enacted my family's murder, and my stomach churns at the idea of living with her, too.

But the moment I said "I will," ancient magic snapped our bond into place. Talia had given a sharp inhale, obviously feeling it too.

That damn thread pulls extra taut, insisting I protect what's mine even though I don't want her to be.

A low growl emanates from my throat, a sound echoed by several members of my pack as the hair on the back of my neck bristles.

Seizing my new bride by the hand, I march us back down the aisle, opposite the way Talia came. We stride all the way to the end, where Conall stands tall, muscles coiled and ready to pounce.

We both tuck our women behind us at the same time, and I'm too focused on the vampires that've crested the hill and are sweeping across the meadow to resent the fact that I've referred to a witch as my woman.

Dozens of figures step from the trees, all dressed in dark elegance. As if they're attending a gothic ball, not a wedding they haven't been invited to. They approach, their movements too smooth and effortless.

We've got them outnumbered, but not by much, and only if we can truly count on the witches.

I'll never count on a fucking witch.

"That's far enough," I say, authority ringing through my voice, and that's a fun new trick that must come with the title. Despite being forced to marry a woman I despise, it's good to be top dog.

Here's hoping I'm not about to lose it in a battle against the vampires.

A singular figure paces ahead of the rest of the crowd, a rankling smile curving the androgynous vampire's lips as they survey the ceremony. "We come not as enemies

but to negotiate.”

Silence stretches out in the space between us, and Conall catches my eye, as if I need the reminder this is all on me now.

Every muscle in my body locks, my teeth clicking together as I clench them in place and step forward.

On instinct, I sweep out an arm behind me, ensuring Talia’s still shielded away.

Yep, just instinct and a magical bond that’ll never go away. No reason to read any more into it.

“And it looks as if congratulations are in order,” they add with a nod toward the petal-strewn aisle that leads to the altar.

I crank my glare to extra heated. “You weren’t invited.”

“Yes, that’s why we didn’t RSVP. Incredibly rude, I know.” White teeth flash between those blood-red lips, the corner of a fang causing mine to elongate in my own mouth. “But we’ve been searching for a witch who can navigate the astral plane for a while.”

My eyebrows lower, and they only scrunch further as I notice the vampire’s gaze pinned on my bride.

Slinging an arm around her shoulders, I tuck her next to me and peer down at her face, a silent question in my eyes. What the hell are they talking about?

Talia’s jaw sets, her eyes narrowing with the obvious hatred she has for me. Her return look either says I don’t know or bite me, werewolf, and little does she know

that if this goes badly, I'll rip her limb from limb, mate bond or not.

“We can stay through the celebration,” says the pangender vampire acting as leader or at least messenger, “or we're happy to pose our offer now and let you get on with it.”

I want to wipe the smug grin from their face, acting like they're accommodating us while trespassing on our territory.

“It'll only take a few minutes, and as long as we can strike a bargain...” Their silken voice turns steely, both fangs fully showing now. “Well, it'll save us all from a lot of unnecessary bloodshed.”

Great. A few hours into being alpha and mere minutes after vowing myself to a woman I loathe, I find out that when it comes to our problems, marriage is just the tip of the iceberg.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:09 am

CHAPTER THREE

Silly me, I sort of thought getting married to a werewolf would be the worst thing to happen to me today.

How nice to be so sorely mistaken.

Most brides get to milk their special day for all it's worth, from decorations to the dress of their dreams to shoving a slice of cake thick with frosting in their groom's face.

As Diego leads me toward the copse of trees where the leaders of the pack, the two covens, and three members from the vampire envoy have gathered, I'd like to shove more than cake in faces.

My new husband doesn't speak as we trudge through the tall swamp grass, my long train catching on various stems, clumps, and twigs. These shoes are gorgeous, but ridiculous to walk in, the heels sinking every couple of steps and leaving me extra slow.

Rather than ask how I'm doing or slow his pace, my groom grips my upper arm and hauls me along, not bothering to be gentle.

My magic simmers beneath the surface, crackling and angry in a way I don't typically experience. It calls to that darker side of the occult that my mother plays in so frequently, which is why I've always shut it down before.

Tonight, as more of my life is about to be stripped from me, I'm tempted to dive into the darkness and see exactly how powerful I can be.

Powerful enough to beat Andromeda, though?

At the memory of the veterinarian nearly bleeding out in her own living room, deep gashes in her neck from my mother's talons, the idea flickers out.

Kerrigan will wear those scars forever, same way I'll always have to live with the regret of pulling her through the portal and the part I played in her capture.

By the time we reach a spot out of hearing range from the rest of the wedding party, who've been instructed to go on to the reception without us, the moon is high. It illuminates the tippy tops of pine trees and bathes my gown in white light.

Wings flap above us as a great horned owl leaves its perch, not interested in becoming prey to this pack of apex predators. Not gonna lie, I'm more than a little jealous it gets to fly away.

I fight my instinct to watch the owl's trail across the sky as those predators all turn their eyes on me.

Well, on me and my laconic groom, who's posted at my side, seething in the intruders' direction.

Tension lingers like a fog, obscuring features and heightening every sensation, until our entire group's an overly tight string about to be plucked.

Beatrix, the High Priestess of the Ironwood Coven, and my mother are posted to our right, eyes narrowed at the vampires in distrust.

I don't trust anyone here, but that's not exactly a new phenomenon for me. For this witch, it's just another Tuesday—or whatever day it is, I hardly keep track anymore.

Conall crosses his arms as he steps a few feet into the circle, a wall of muscle and malevolence.

Then Diego clears his throat and steps up next to Conall's side, dragging me along with him. Reminding everybody he's in charge.

“You came to my land uninvited, and I don't take kindly to threats,” he says to the vampires in a deadly tone that sends a shiver down my spine. “State your terms before I rip your throats out.”

In other words, threats piss him off, so he's issuing more threats. Cool, cool, cool. At least I'm not married to a hypocrite.

Also, that shiver was totally from fear and not admiring the power he commands with a couple of sentences. Just in case there was any question, because it feels like my body has a few.

“No introductions, then?” It comes from the elegant vampire who crashed the end of the ceremony, their deep red lips stretching into something resembling amusement.

Lean, with a fluid style and a killer sense of fashion, they have platinum hair that's longer on top and closely cropped on the sides. It suits their angular features, and their beauty, genderless and timeless in a completely entrancing way.

They sigh and shake their head. “Nope, that just won't do. While it's obvious nobody taught you manners, centuries on this earth have taught me the value of decorum.

“This is Helena,” they say, gesturing to the female vampire at their side wearing a

corseted, burgundy cocktail dress. Dark hair spills over her shoulders in a sleek curtain that frames her amplified cleavage, skin so pale it gleams in the moonlight.

They swing their arm to their right, indicating the vampire flanking their other side. Tall and broad-shouldered, his features are sharp, aristocratic, and carved with an arrogance only the truly ancient can achieve. “This is Cassius.”

Of course, that’s his name. It’s almost as if they’re trying to get called out for being the bloodsucking creatures they are.

Cassius’s silver eyes gleam like polished steel, contrasting deep umber skin and inky coils that are pulled into a low ponytail at the nape of his neck. He gives a slight nod as he adjusts lace cuffs from the Baroque era. If you googled vampire, an image similar to his would pop up.

“And I’m Riven,” they finish, placing a hand on their chest. Black fingernails contrast with the crisp white button-down that’s tucked into tailored slacks.

Topped off with a cape coat they so effortlessly wear, there’s an undeniable magnetism about them.

I’m also a big fan of the sarcastic way they bob their head at Conall and Diego and add, “Charmed, I’m sure. ”

I find myself swaying toward their arched eyebrow and crooked smile, slightly breathless. By the moon and stars, I’m going wherever you are.

A low rumble comes from the man at my side, his fingers digging deeper into my arm. “Could you at least try to hide the fact that you’re drooling over another at our wedding?”

“Oh, is this our wedding?” I grit through my teeth, yanking free of Diego’s grasp. “How dare I forget while standing in the middle of the forest in a bridal gown, discussing an alliance with freaking vampires.”

Everyone falls silent—even the crickets that were chirping, far cheerier about their mating than I’d ever be.

“Natalia,” my mother chides, not one to miss a chance. Her existence is a constant blade against my neck, its sharpened edge at the ready. Jade green eyes, so similar to mine, cloud over with calculated cruelty.

“If you’re done,” Helena says in a syrupy sweet tone that very much insists I be.

I definitely am once I catch Riven making eyes at me. Honestly, given the option, I’d choose the charming vampire over the asshole werewolf at my side.

The mere thought causes my skin to prickle, the buzz of unseen magic reminding me I’m bound to another. Seriously, fuck this day and every single thing about it.

At my nod, we finish introductions, which is how I find out Nissa, the werewolf with deep bronze skin and ebony dreads adorned with golden cuffs, is Diego’s beta. His number two is pregnant, wearing a pale purple dress that highlights her baby bump, and a murderous scowl on her face.

Is it possible she’s even grouchier than my groom?

Affecting a compliant, listening expression, I begin to disassociate to keep myself as safe as I can be given the dire situation. I’ve gotten rather good at tuning out while functioning in autopilot.

Supernatural resurgence...

Unknown forces at play, yada, yada, yada.

An enormous dude I assume is a werewolf stands back several yards from our circle like a silent sentinel, his long red hair, beard, and braids making him look more like a Viking warrior. Even wearing a tweed suit, vest, and a gold pocket watch, and is that a hawk perched on his shoulder?

But then I hear it— the Hollow —and my attention snaps back into focus.

I always thought the realm that swallowed people whole was just an urban legend—a story told around campfires to keep young witches obedient and scare us into practicing harder.

“One of your sisters hid a powerful object there that belongs to us, years before most of you were born,” Riven says with a little bite in their voice, anger glinting as they grit their teeth.

“We’ve been trying to get it back for half a century, but now we’re facing a threat only it can help us defeat. ”

Even if the Hollow exists outside of myth, it’s known as a place between realms, where everything is darkness and the laws of nature completely unravel. Time doesn’t exist, and yet somehow lasts forever. If the isolation doesn’t break you, your own fears will rise up and slowly drive you mad.

Unless the nightmare creatures get to you first.

“Which brings us to her,” Helena says, and fuck me, her gaze alights on me as she says it. “Our oracle tells us the power to enter the realm has finally been awakened, and she ’s the only one who can reach it.”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:09 am

CHAPTER FOUR

Gotta be honest, I don't understand half of what Helena just said.

Something about it prickles my skin and shrinks down my world to the here and now, though.

Oracle.

Power's finally been awakened .

She's the only one who can reach it.

And by she , she meant me . The impotent witch and massive disappointment, only good for being married off and bringing forth an heir with actual power.

But as Helena's amber eyes lock onto mine, a strange tugging sensation ripples beneath my skin, and the golden threads of the universe blink brighter into existence.

My mother's jaw locks, razor sharp, her accusation slicing through the silence. "All this time you've been pretending to be so powerless."

Oh, for Hecate's sake, instead of being relieved I have more uses she can exploit, she's mad?

I'm the one who was locked in closets, told fear would eventually unlock my magic. I read a grimoire for three days and two nights, no sleep, no food, no breaks. And in

the end, she was furious I dared to pass out before I mastered any spells.

“I have no idea what she’s talking about, Mother,” I say, my voice slightly scratchy from disuse. “You’re finding this out at the same time as I am.”

Beside me, eyes the color of the darkest, most bitter espresso narrow on me in suspicion. Perfect. My groom’s taking my mom’s side, so guess who’s sleeping on the couch tonight? Fingers crossed he doesn’t shed.

I don’t even know if we have a couch or a bed or what the house even looks like.

For a moment, I feel hopelessly lost and alone, but that’s nothing new.

My gaze drifts past Helena to Riven again, as if another vampire will soothe my stung feelings and abiding sense of ennui. As if I’ll find a bosom body instead of a monster who wants to sink their teeth into me.

Riven’s lips quirk, a hint of fang flashing in their smile. I might welcome it, as long as it gets me away from the brooding beast at my side.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see that Andromeda’s advancing on me. “Ungrateful brat, I’ve given you everything. How dare you keep this from me!”

She raises her hand to strike, and embarrassment burns my skin that they’ll all witness her violence against me.

In a flash, Diego moves—faster than I expected, even with preternatural speed. He catches my mother by the wrist, his body a wall of muscle that blocks her off from me. “Enough,” he says, his low growl reverberating through the space and leaving my skin humming.

Nobody has ever stood up to my mother. None of the witches in the coven, and certainly not me.

An emotion I can't name but suspect is gratitude floods me. Given everything else that's happened between Diego and me, I don't know how exactly to feel about it.

Andromeda, however, is pissed. Green light crackles at her fingertips, and I hate that I'm not strong enough to stand up for him the way he stood up for me.

But then Diego wrenches her arm behind her back, spinning her around as if he's a cop and she's about to take a ride to the station.

Now his fangs are out, dangerously close to Mother's carotid artery.

"We agreed to your deal, but make no mistake, I'll protect what's mine at all costs, and you've ensured Natalia's part of that."

Since he was defending me and all, I bit back my comment about how I was right freaking here. Same way I stifled the sudden ache in my core at the gravelly timbre of his voice when he said my name.

It was deeper. Lower.

Filled with a possessive edge that left no room for argument.

Nobody called me Natalia, either. Heat pools low in my gut, my nipples strain against the confines of my dress, and I'd give anything for a fan to cool my face.

It must be the bond.

My shallow breaths saw in and out of my mouth, my gravitational pull adjusting to

Diego De la Cruz's wake, and I couldn't stop staring at his sculpted jaw—even though he's still centimeters away from puncturing my mother's life-giving vein.

Andromeda's not threatening him or the pack or flinging her magic around like I expected. She's stone-fucking silent, and it's utter bliss, vampires and werewolf groom notwithstanding.

“And I'm bored,” Riven says, but their magnetism no longer causes a blip of a blip. My ovaries are performing a drumline routine, my fixation on Diego's mouth—fangs and all—growing more and more distracting.

Diego flings my mother away from him, not gentle or mannerly, not an ounce of goodwill. Without taking his gaze off the gathered group in front of him, he extends a hand, stretching long fingers in my direction.

Without a second thought, I take hold, practically floating to his side as he anchors me against him. It's odd for our bodies to be so in sync when he's still looking at me like I'm a burden he's now forced to attend to.

“Tell us more,” he instructs the vampires, and I sink my teeth into my lower lip, studying the dark scruff that perfectly frames his lips.

I hate him, I hate him, I—Goddess help me, he's brutishly beautiful.

The warmth of his body seeps into me, leaving me a tad breathless and dizzy.

Andromeda's wrath is aimed directly at me again, but with Diego's protective arm around me, I can't bring myself to worry or even care about the consequences. I'm no longer hers, and it's odd to feel so bound and so free all at once.

“It complicates things that she's so unaware,” Helena says, the scowl she aims at me

eerily similar to my mother's.

"That's me," I mutter. "Disappointing supernatural creatures everywhere with my lack of power."

"Lack of power?" Riven gives a mirthless laugh. "Hardly."

They slink closer, and Diego's steely fingers grip my hip in a possessive show that causes a pulse between my thighs.

It'd be great if my body would stop reacting in ways I can't help.

Given the choice between the wolves or the vamps, I'm not sure who I'd pick, but the choice has been taken from me anyway.

"Do you really not know?" Riven pauses their steps at Diego's low growl, the corner of their mouth quirking as they raise their hands in the classic surrender stance. "Down, boy. I'm no threat to your bride. Not tonight, anyway."

Every line of Diego's body snaps tight, and I swear I feel the nip of claws at my waist.

I have the oddest urge to spin in his arms and soothe the storm; except I have no idea what my groom likes or doesn't like, only I land more on the latter than the former.

"Stop looking with your human eyes and open your third eye," Riven instructs, and I'm fairly certain they mean me. "A proper teacher would've instilled enough faith in yourself to trust your senses. I see that's been beaten out of you, your Sight eclipsed by your survival instinct for too long..."

Riven glances at my mother, disgust in their expression. "Too bad. Now we don't

have time for proper training. But it's still there, I can sense it."

"That makes one of us," I mutter, and a muscle flexes in Diego's jaw. Irritation or amusement, I'm not sure, and I try to convince myself I don't care.

"It's that spark you feel..." Riven's smooth voice wraps around me like silk, awakening the tingling energy that I've retreated into during my loneliest stretches. There were a lot of lonely stretches.

But there was sensing the frog jumping from lily pad to lily pad in the pond at our backs, and then there was finding a mythical object in a realm I'd previously deemed fictional.

"That's not how my powers work." The ability to see the glowing framework that connects us all showed up around adolescence, but it was a while before I could sort the glittering latticework that drifted up from the plants and trees from the individual imprints of souls.

"It's not some kind of magical GPS. I'm not a hound dog who can pick up a particular scent.

I only see the auras of what's already around me and..."

I'm not sure I should admit this part, but in for a penny, in for a dollar or whatever. "And yes, I can sometimes see the pathway to find them."

Betrayal and fury gleam within the depths of Mother's gaze. Her lips don't move, but inside my head, she calls me a liar, and I'm the one who curls closer to Diego this time.

She can't hurt me anymore. Not physically anyway.

“But it’s only ever worked on something with a heartbeat—I’ve never used it to find an object. I’m much better with critters. People tend to blur together and read mostly the same.”

“We’re not talking about a regular object,” Riven says, their tone almost reverent. “We’re talking about a weapon with a powerful signature.”

I can’t help it, I’m cautiously intrigued.

“Which is where you come in.” Riven lifts an eyebrow at me, and my pulse kicks up. “Because getting in and out of the Hollow requires a witch who can navigate the astral.”

“The astral?” I ask, wary. There’s something they’re not telling me. “I can’t imagine a group of vampires came all this way and risked a confrontation with werewolves to watch me get lost in the astral plane.”

“We came to get back what you stole from us,” Helena snaps, and Riven places a calming hand on the other vampire’s shoulder.

“While I can see the threads that map out the universe,” Riven says, reaching out and dragging fingers across the wispy golden strings like an angel plucking a celestial chord. “I can’t weave them or bend them to my will.”

“Neither can I,” I say, and Helena clenches her jaw, her eye twitching like she’s about to lose her temper and choke the life out of me.

Diego must sense it too, because a low, threatening noise emanates from the back of his throat.

But even as I say it, when I stretch out a finger, those golden threads bend and swirl

around me, which is new.

“You’d better hope you’re wrong,” Riven says simply. “Or else we have no reason to forge an alliance. There’s a supernatural storm brewing, and whether it’s this month or the next, hunters are coming for us all.”

Hunters.

That’s a word I understand all too well. We’ve flown mostly under the radar since the whole Salem Witch trials era, with hunters mostly focusing on vampires and werewolves. But once they discovered and slaughtered a coven in Toronto, we were added to their search and destroy mission.

“The vampires are ready for war.” Riven’s gaze moves to Diego, a challenging gleam in their eyes, the color of a cloudless summer sky. “How about you, Wolfie? Brand new to leadership and chomping at the bit. Are you?”

CHAPTER FIVE

This is a setup.

Has to be.

First, the witches force a marriage on me that I don't want. Then, mere minutes later, we're hit with a curveball about retrieving some weapon from some mystical place only my new bride can go?

I don't trust a damn word coming out of their mouths, and the same goes to Andromeda. And Natalia, for that matter.

"You want to go to war, I'm happy to rip your head off and get it going right now." I let my desire to follow through with the threat ring through the words, my teeth elongating in my mouth.

"Patience, Alpha. There will inevitably come a time when we'll need your brute force and penchant for violence.

" Riven examines their flashy, bejeweled fingernails as though we're discussing the weather.

"Right now, we need you to support your new bride as she gets a crash course on her real weaving powers. The threat is amping them up, yes? You find yourself in the in between more and more?"

All of us look to Natalia, whose jaw drops open and hangs there.

“I...didn’t know I was going anywhere,” she says. “But yes, the pull has been growing stronger.”

At her mother’s darted glare, Natalia quickly adds, “Only since the mate bond snapped into place during the ceremony.” She props a fist on her hip, her exasperation palpable. “I’ve married the wolf and done what you wanted me to do, Mother. You should be happy.”

“I’d be happy if I had a daughter capable of what they’re asking.

” Andromeda lifts her chin, the cruel mask of High Priestess snapping into place.

“You might as well slaughter the wolves now. It’s my greatest failure and an embarrassment to admit, but the weapon you seek won’t be found by a witch so weak as my own flesh and blood. ”

Damn. There were mommy issues and then there were reasons for mommy issues, and evidently my new mother-in-law was willing to delve new, horrible depths.

Conall steps forward, arms crossed over his broad chest. He’s struggling to let go of control, I can tell. He also has a solid decade of experience, and while I work not to show it, I’m out of my depth.

“Sending our alpha and his bride on a wild goose chase seems an awful lot like a setup. Stop skirting around what you’re not telling us, or this is over.”

A few hisses come from the vampires, and Conall and I growl right back and flash our own fangs.

“Seriously?” Natalia says from my side. “Let’s stop measuring dicks and wands and get this chat over and done with. I’ve got a reception to attend to, and while I might not care much about the groom, I’ve been dreaming of that cake all my life.”

What do you know, that shuts us up. I have to respect her for putting it out there, even if I’m also semi-offended. I’ve been relegated to second place a lot in my life, but it’s the first time I’ve lost to dessert.

That’s only because she hasn’t experienced how good I am with my tongue.

Helena, Cassius, and Riven exchange glances, evidently deciding it’s finally fucking time to let us in on what they’re trying to hold back.

“Robbing us of the Blood Loom robbed us of our magic,” Cassius says in a raspy voice. “The loom allows us to weave spells from blood, restoring what we lost.”

“Whose blood?” Natalia asks.

“That of our enemies, of course.” Riven shoots Natalia a wolfish grin. “We’re happy to use the blood of your enemies as well, given we can come to an agreement.”

I blow out a breath, skeptical and ready for that party Natalia mentioned. “You’re asking her to go into this place and retrieve something dangerous, and you expect us to believe it’s in our best interest?”

“I expect you to understand that war will involve bloodshed on all sides, and anything that draws attention to our kind only increases the risk to us all,” Helena says. “If you want to end all of us here and now, I guess that’s your prerogative...”

At her nonchalant shrug, I’m tempted to go feral and tear the vampires and both High Priestesses limb from limb. Just distribute every piece of them across the forest for

other scavengers to pick their bones and be done with it.

“We’re offering a way to tip the scales before the tides turn against us both,” Riven says. “But make no mistake, if we don’t do something now, our world will get ripped from us.”

Natalia goes to run her fingers through her hair, then meets the resistance of the flowers and her veil and drops her arm to her side. “Okay, let’s say that I agree, and we get onboard and create one big happy supernatural family?—”

“That’s never happening,” I say, while at the same time Conall grouses, “Over my dead body.”

“Thanks, guys,” Natalia quips. “Feeling really welcomed by my new furry family, but if y’all will quiet down, it’s my turn to talk.”

She almost seems surprised by her own audacity, so I decide to give her a little rope and see where this goes. “How do we know you won’t turn the weapon on us once we defeat our common enemy?”

Shit, I really should’ve thought of asking that. Instead, I got caught up in the way her dress hugs her ass—it’s been giving me a semi all night.

“We can cast a spell on the loom, binding it to Talia,” Beatrix says, speaking for the first time in a tinkling voice that reminds me of wind chimes. “And since she’s mated to your alpha, any strike against your pack would be automatically rejected.”

“Okay, that solves that problem,” Natalia says, sounding disappointed rather than relieved. “But the Hollow’s not somewhere you come and go. It’s a place that pulls you in, drags you under, and refuses to let go.”

A chill seizes hold of my spine and tiptoes cold fingers down the rigid line.

“Not for a witch strong enough to navigate its shifting realities,” Riven says quickly, pinning their amorous gaze on my bride for what feels like the billionth time.

“I have faith in you, that you can withstand its...particular brand of madness. With the right training and the natural, untapped power within, you’ll be strong enough to enter the Hollow, retrieve the loom, and return unscathed. ”

While they don’t say “Simple as that,” the tone is definitely there.

That damn protective urge flairs again, even stronger than before. “You’re still asking an awful lot of us without offering much in return. We’ve got plenty of weapons in our armory.”

“Not like this,” Riven hisses, and I take a step in their direction.

Natalia stops me with a hand on my chest.

“The witches don’t get to rob us of our spellwork and use it to defend themselves and you lot while we’re hung out to dry,” Riven sneers, and my blood pumps faster through my veins, preparing my body for a fight, just in case.

“This is our best chance of retrieval, though there’s a little more to it than that. ”

I press my lips into a firm, unamused, and unsurprised line. “We’re not lifting a finger until you come all the way clean.”

“For the highest chance of success,” Cassius cuts in, lifting a finger as if he’s a professor teaching a lecture and he can’t wait to share a fun fact, “the Realmwalker needs to be bound to something.”

His eyes flash silver as he spares me the tiniest glance. “Or better yet, bound to someone strong enough to pull her back, with inherent ties to the moon. It’s the strongest tether we have to this realm.”

“Someone strong enough,” Natalia repeats as she processes the information. Then those mesmerizing eyes of hers turn on me again. “A werewolf.”

Helena smooths the fabric of her gown, satisfied. “So, you see, this arrangement is mutually beneficial. We require Talia’s unique talents, and in return, our vampire army will use the Blood Loom to ensure our survival and change the course of this war between the hunters for good.”

Suddenly the vampires were eager to protect us? Sounded too good to be true.

But entire packs and factions of other supernatural creatures were going missing on the northern front. It’s too big of a coincidence to actually be one. We’re being eradicated, and we were dying out already, which is one of the other reasons I agreed to this whole marriage and a baby thing.

Helena steps back, offering a final, knowing smile. “If you refuse this chance, make no mistake, there won’t be another. You’ll be the one without enough warriors to defend what’s coming, and we’ll not only watch, we’ll help.”

CHAPTER SIX

By the time we make our way from the main lodge that stands at the center of an expansive, multi-leveled building with massive wooden beams and a wraparound balcony, exhaustion has seeped into every fiber of my being. Until tired is all I am, and it feels like tired is all I'll ever be.

I'm not even sure where we're headed as Diego and I leave the cluster of buildings that make the compound look more like a luxury mountain resort than a stronghold for werewolves.

But here and there, the flicker of torches and sentries stationed along the perimeter remind me that beneath the polished, cozy woodland retreat, it's very much a fortress.

A fortress I now call...home?

Not that the word has ever held much meaning for me. The only place that's truly felt like home to me is when I'm lost in nature, a singular glittering thread in the complex life force webbing, only the plants and woodland creatures to comfort me.

"It's this way, third house on the right," Diego says, keeping a stoic pace with me. Proving that in this particular forest, the woodland creature plastered to my side all night doesn't give a shit about soothing me.

While I'm entirely too drained to smile over the idea of referring to him as a woodland creature to his face, the corner of my mouth quirks at least a centimeter or two.

Bossy and broody, the responses I've received since leaving our meeting with the other heads of the supernatural clans have been primarily grunts.

And while he kept his hand glued to the small of my back during that meeting and throughout the reception, he hasn't touched me since we left the lodge, leading me to believe it was mostly for show.

Not that I want his touches and gestures to be for anything else, but it'd be nice if I didn't feel so completely alone. We were both forced into this marriage, so it's extra offensive he keeps acting like he got the raw end of the deal.

But fine, be that way, and I don't want any soothing or physical gestures from him anyway. All he symbolizes is another couple of decades of my lifeforce being slowly blotted out beneath the crushing weight of another stern thumb.

For a building I can make out in the glow of the moonlight, the walk to that third house on the right feels longer than it should.

The weight of everything from the start of the ceremony to the vampires crashing the wedding and discovering there are more threats and a supernatural war to worry about hangs between us.

Thick and suffocating, the heavy burden drags behind us like tin cans attached to the bumper of the car the newlyweds drive off in.

Fun fact: tying those noisy cans to the back was a tradition originally meant to ward off evil spirits.

Sadly, I don't think that'll work for us, as Diego and I are technically the things that go bump in the night.

Who's going to fear a witch with no power?

A question posed to me by my mother countless times, I never understood why she thought I'd want to be feared. In my experience, that came along with hatred, a truth I was too scared to share with her, but she's the source of my aversion anyhow.

With a grunt, Diego inclines his head toward the flagstone walkway that carves a path through neatly trimmed grass and plenty of shrubbery. Two towering pine trees stand guard on either side of the wraparound porch, the dark wood of the exterior blending into the night.

Eastward facing, with floor-to-ceiling windows that must provide an extra glorious view at sunrise, in another world, coming home to such a gorgeous cabin would feel like a dream.

But lately, all life's got to offer me is nightmares.

My heels catch on the stones, my fatigue causing me to drag my feet more than the terrain allows.

After the bombshell revelation that I'm apparently some mystical key to a world I barely understand, Diego and I had gone to the reception with the other werewolves—not to celebrate, but to update the pack.

It was an exhausting, tension-filled debrief, where almost every set of eyes in the room turned on me with varying levels of skepticism and distrust.

Did they doubt my skills or my fealty? Because honestly, me too, and I'm definitely talking about both fronts.

Big surprise, feudal obligations don't exactly inspire loyalty, and it's not like there

was any love lost on either side.

With the wolves, I was a stranger and a witch.

With the witches I was a dud and a bitch.

Lose, lose. Again and again. Is it any wonder I preferred animals and the forest?

Our footsteps echo against the wooden steps of the porch, blending in with the steady chirping of crickets. I step aside so Diego can open the front door, minding the bag with the plastic Tupperware container inside.

The in-house caterer packed me up a giant wedge of wedding cake, the only good thing to come out of the reception as far as I was concerned.

And the wedding, for that matter.

I plan to grab a fork and eat it in bed, possibly while crying.

Rather than pull a set of keys out of his pocket, Diego simply opens the unlocked door and sets the luggage that contains my few earthly possessions next to the tidy row of shoes.

While I'd inevitably noticed he smelled like sandalwood, bergamot, and something wild. His masculine scent combines with the pine-fresh air from outdoors, along with an underlying whiff of hickory and ash from the stone fireplace.

Before I can help myself, I inhale a lungful and hold it in, then struggle to play it cool, like I didn't find the amalgamation a pinch intoxicating.

We push further into the wide, open concept living space with striking exposed

beams, sparse rustic touches, and furniture that looks well-worn but comfortable.

At the flip of a switch, golden light bathes the area, highlighting that the top of the cabin appears to be a loft area with an overlooking balcony.

Diego rubs a hand over his jaw before lifting my luggage by the handle and crossing to the floating staircase that's a mix of steel and wood. The entire space is a sleek mix of modern and earthy touches, and I'd totally compliment him on his taste if we had that kind of friendship.

If we had any relationship at all, really.

"Bedroom's up here," he says, and I halt my exploratory steps in his direction and swallow hard.

Getting right to it, I see, I want to snark, but my flailing courage keeps the words lodged in my throat. It's too real, too scary. All the things I did my best not to concentrate on when my mother brokered this deal.

Having a supernatural air means having sex. With my husband.

Like an aristocrat on her way to the guillotine, I lift my head high, doing my best not to focus on how I'm about to lose it. Like on the walk over, our footsteps echo through the quiet, his rubber-soled tread much quieter than the now mud-and-jewel-encrusted heels on my feet.

Every few paces they snag on the front of my dress, until I gather up the mucked-up skirt in my fists and take the last few steps.

"You're probably too big to fit through the slats," I say, embarrassingly breathless by the time I've reached the top, "but if I slip and fall, I'm going to shoot right out the

other side of the staircase, and then what?"

Diego turns and looks at me, a crinkle bisecting his brow. "'Don't fall' would be my advice."

I hope he caught my eye roll, because I made it extra big just for him.

Before I can come up with more sarcastic responses I won't be brave enough to say aloud anyway, my gaze locks on the bed in the center of the three walls and A-frame ceiling.

Not that it feels crowded, in fact, quite the opposite.

With walls that are at least nine feet tall, it's a vaulted space with darker wood walls, as espresso-colored as his eyes but with a hint of gray.

There's no door, just the open-air balcony overlooking the bachelor pad living room, and most importantly...

One bed.

Covered in thick, downy white and charcoal-colored blankets.

It's huge, the spotlight in a space meant for sleep and relaxation, but again, there's only one bed.

Of all the things to break me, a king-sized bed with fluffy blankets and pillows shouldn't what does me in, but tears sting my eyes anyway.

"Oh. Right." My vision blurs, and I blink, blink, blink, gritting my teeth to prevent the saltwater from escaping down my cheeks.

He doesn't get to see me cry.

"Yeah." Diego sets my luggage down with a thud, the quiet between us stretching out until our resounding awkwardness is all I can hear. "I, uh, didn't think about that."

We must be the only newlyweds in the world who've never had sex not to give any thought to racing into bed.

I'm not exactly a virgin, but other than a few boys during college—the only freedom I've experienced in my life, and my mother took it away after a year—I'm certainly not very experienced, either.

Since it's also been years, I might've forgotten how, but I'm pretty sure it doesn't involve sitting in bed in my jammies eating cake. A fact that's only causing more unshed tears to burn my eyes.

"You take the bed," Diego says, raking fingers through his hair and leaving strands spiking up in different directions. "I'll take the couch."

I have the oddest urge to ease the tension from his brow, probably because he's offered up the one thing I currently want most—to be in bed, all alone. With cake, as previously established.

Given how tidy the place is, he's the type of guy to kick a gal out of bed for eating crackers, but what he doesn't know won't hurt him. "Is it at least a pull-out couch?"

"Nah, I've never been a pull-out guy," he says, and then the two of us freeze, making wide eyes at each other.

A nervous laugh sputters from my lips, breaking the tension a bit. "Guess that'll solve our terms and conditions clause about having a baby."

He gives a huffed sort of chuckle, both of us doing our best to find humor in this bizarre deal we've committed ourselves to.

I fiddle with my veil, ready to be rid of it after hours of holding tight. "Seriously, I appreciate it."

He nods, and the unexpected kindness of letting me have his bed causes a lump in my throat. "It's been a long day."

"It has," I agree, shuffling my feet. "I know that eventually, we'll have to..." Heat creeps up my neck, and I really should've just gone with a simple "goodnight."

"Yep, in between saving the supernatural world as we know it." Diego's already backpedaling toward the stairs, his shoulders and spine rigid. "While I understand we have a mutual obligation..."

Great, now we've gone from baby-making to mutual obligation. I can't help the sour face I pull, and his expression curdles in return. So much for our momentary truce or understanding or whatever.

"What I mean to say," Deigo grumbles, "is that right now we're strangers. Let's at least get to know each other a little first."

"You think that'll make it better?" I try to sound snarky and maybe even a tad hopeful and flirty, but I feel too raw, too vulnerable.

His lips twitch with a reluctant, slightly lopsided, almost smile. "Couldn't hurt."

I hug my arms around my middle and nod, unsure what else to do. It's so weird to be so grateful to someone I was certain I loathed.

At the retreating of his footsteps down the staircase, I cross the room and flop down on the bed, the butterfly sleeves of my wedding dress billowing around me.

I kick off my heels, glad to be done with them, the lacy, mud crusted skirt long enough to hide my battered feet.

I debate falling back into the softness of the mattress, but the quieter the room, the louder my thoughts.

I have the strangest urge to call my husband back to me like a dog. Just a pat, pat to my thighs and a hollered-out “Come ‘ere boy!”

It’s not actually him I want, but rather more faith in me.

Since ignoring the mission that’s been unceremoniously dropped at my feet isn’t working, I squint my eyes and rub my temples. Pale moonlight filters in from the giant skylight above the bed, and the circulatory system of our universe shimmers into view.

I lift my fingers hesitantly, focusing on snatching up one of the threads to see if I can separate it from the rest.

Pressure builds in my head, my own blood vessels straining with effort. Electricity nips at my fingers, the woven golden fibers bulging like a swimmer breaching the tension of the water’s surface.

For an exhilarating second or two I think, holy shit, I can actually do this.

Letting my eyes go hazy, I peer into the glittering, fraying web, attempting to see that hollowed out between that I’ve been tasked with navigating.

Then snap , they recoil and bite me, a rubber band pulled until it breaks.

Pain blooms through my skull and my vision goes piercingly white, causing my eyes to water and burn.

I wince, dropping my head into my hands. With a groan that can't be helped, I attempt to massage out the throbbing ache that dipping my toe into that world between worlds left behind.

It's like it doesn't want me there.

And somehow, I'm supposed to find a whole-ass weapon that's hidden inside.

“This is why I should've stuck to jammies and cake,” I mutter, craning an arm around to unzip my dress.

Not only is the zipper in a difficult to reach spot, even when I get a fairly good grip on the tab, the damn thing won't budge.

It's stuck. Because of course it is.

When twisting myself into pretzel-ish shapes and tugging and swearing don't work, I groan loud enough my groom can inevitably hear it—even without the supernatural hearing, it's a very open floor plan.

Swallowing back my pride and frustration, I call out his name. “Diego? I hate to ask, but I'm afraid I need your help.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

That couch looks a lot smaller than it did this morning.

I stand at the edge of the living room, loosening my bowtie, popping open the top two buttons of my shirt, and rolling my shoulders in an attempt to ease the tension that's held them extra tight for hours.

The three-cushion sectional is fine—decent, even—but definitely not built for a man my size.

The truth is, everything feels more crowded now that I'm a married man, even with my bride hiding upstairs and commandeering my bedroom.

Today has been a goddamn shitshow, where I somehow went from Conall's right hand man to the alpha of the Bridgewater Pack. Right in time for vampires to show up and tell us we're in danger, and I'm still not sure whether to believe them or go on a killing spree.

My fists clench at my sides.

Then comes that musical, lilting voice, as if Natalia simply oozes the ethereal. "Diego? I hate to ask, but I'm afraid I need your help."

At the request for assistance, my inner caveman roars to the surface. Just like that, I'm ready to throw her over my shoulder and catch her a sabretooth tiger. Not necessarily in that order.

I clear my throat and say, “I’ll be right up.”

First things first, I’ve got to get my head straight. Around her, I’m restless, unsettled, and on edge in a way I don’t like.

Because she’s a fucking witch. I hate her on principle, and yet I hate that I don’t hate her more. I was all set to go about my life as if nothing had really changed, and she could either sleep next to me or downstairs.

But I’d seen that flicker of fear in her eyes when she realized there was only one bed—seen that look on her face when her mother raised her palm to strike her.

I grit my teeth and let my neutral mask descend as I start up the stairs. After all, Natalia’s in the same shitty situation I am. Forced into a life she didn’t ask for and a brewing war she never signed up for. Yet somehow, together, we’re supposed to be the key to stopping it.

Like it or not.

No pressure or anything.

I exhale through my nose, doing my best to rid myself of the desire to inhale her sweet scent and hold it in my lungs forever. She smelled like running through a meadow on a warm summer’s day, wild honeysuckle, frankincense, and a sweet-almond vanilla, meadowsweet scent.

Natalia stands at the foot of the bed, her skin flushed from exertion. Her curls are frizzy and wild, no longer in the elegant style she wore beneath her veil at the wedding—as if I’ve already done the ravishing most grooms get to do.

A certain body part of mine twitches, letting me know it’s down. It’s been moons and

moons since I last indulged, and had I known I'd be getting married at the start of today, I would've done more to slake my lust.

Natalia doesn't say a word; she simply spins around, displaying inches and inches of creamy skin. Between the veils and the curls and the madness of the vampires, I didn't see the low scoop in the back that lands right between her shoulder blades.

My throat works a swallow, and I take three long strides across the room.

I tower over her, my tiny bride with the ivory skin and golden hair. Licking my suddenly dry lips, I grip the tab of the zipper and tug, scowling when it doesn't budge.

Curling a hand around her shoulder to brace both of us, I give it another yank, and she stumbles backward into my chest. Despite our height difference, her ass also pushes right into my crotch, and I just got my dick to settle down.

"I'm doing my best not to rip it," I say, this moment as delicate as the fabric of the dress.

I don't do delicate.

"I guess it doesn't matter," she says, her voice as small and tiny as she is. "It's not like I'll wear it ever again."

In that case, I'll rip it right off you.

I clear my throat and go to grab for the zipper again, stifling a groan when my knuckles graze her smooth skin.

Her sharp intake of breath suggests she's as affected as me, leaving me slightly dizzy.

While I did my best to shove the truth away, she's fucking gorgeous, okay?

It's a relief to admit it, even if it's only in my own brain. With green eyes and delicate features and soft pink lips, I can't stop staring at her when she speaks. There's also a vulnerability to her I didn't expect—a helplessness that calls to my inner warrior.

It's just the bond, I tell myself for at least the fifth or sixth time, and thank Christ, the zipper finally slides free.

Down it goes, extra quickly since I was pulling with my might, stopping a mere inch above the curve of her ass—an asset her dress spotlights with hard-on inducing glory.

It should be illegal for a dress like that to hug her curves so tightly before flaring out into the skirt that puddles and drags on the floor.

Natalia, shifts her weight from one foot to the other, sweeping her hair aside to glance over her shoulder. “Everything okay back there?”

Nope. Not now that I'm utterly fixated on the bare skin and the idea of her shuddering beneath me. I can just make out the two dimples above her ass cheeks, and I'm struggling to remember I'm not allowed to touch.

To taste.

Savor.

I force my gaze to the line of guitars on my wall and breathe out through my nose, never inhaling, absolutely not intoxicated by her herbal sweet scent.

Being a witch, I guess I sort of expected her to smell like rot and ruin.

Or that sulfur scent that smells like rotten eggs and lingers behind when they cast their spells.

Perhaps Natalia's not as cruel and calculated as her mother, but that statement would apply to ninety-nine percent of the world, so it's not exactly a compliment.

And while she'd appeared apprehensive about climbing into bed with me, she was a terrorized blank slate around Andromeda.

I've never seen anyone simply stand there, so resigned to taking physical abuse, like when Andromeda raised her hand to strike.

It'd made it so clear how often she'd experienced the abuse, and the rage that'd filled me in the forest takes deeper roots within me and gives me something to focus on besides her ass.

"Back in the forest, with your mother..." I really should've planned out a better way to pose the subject before I opened my mouth, but it's too late now. "Is she always like that?"

Natalia stills, all the muscles in her body going taut. "Yes. But she's even worse in secret."

All my life I've lamented the loss of my family, to the point I never even considered others experienced so much cruelty at the hands of theirs.

"I'm sorry," I say, and I mean it. Nobody should have to live like that.

Natalia whirs around, firing a drop-dead-already glare at me. "I don't need your pity—I don't need anyone's."

Okay, so kitty has claws, and it'll do me well to remember that fact. Still, she misunderstands where I'm coming from. "It's not pity. As I said to your mother and everyone else in the forest, I'll protect what's mine."

"I'm not yours," she snaps back, crossing her arms and taking another step backward. "My mother forced my hand, simple as that. I don't belong to anyone."

I should let it go. We had a few civil minutes, and she can peel off her dress at any time, so mission accomplished. But this is my forest, my pack, my house, and my bedroom.

My bride.

"That's where you're wrong, sweetheart. Vows have been exchanged, and you're the magic key to retrieving the weapon the vampires are after. Every single member of my pack is my responsibility, and like it or not, that now includes you."

I do some backing up of my own, happy to retreat to the couch so I won't have to deal with the ice princess and her peeling apart dress.

I can almost convince myself I don't want to rip it off her and show her exactly how commanding and wicked I can be.

"Neither of us has the luxury of belonging to ourselves, and I only have so much patience to give."

Silence on her end, but the inferno glowing within the depths of her eyes conveys I've pissed her off.

Fine by me. If she wants to spend our time together exchanging jabs and insults, I've got plenty locked and loaded.

The only good witch is a dead witch.

Most curses have more heart than you.

Trusting a witch is like traipsing through the forest with steaks strapped to your ass and hoping for a hug from a bear.

“Go ahead and have your feelings tonight.” I clench and release my fists at my side and let gold roll over my eyes.

The alpha headlights are new, and I’m slightly intoxicated by the surge of power.

“But make no mistake, they don’t get to be more important than all the lives of my people that are on the line.”

Just before I turn and thunder down the stairs, I call out, “Tomorrow, you and I begin figuring out how to navigate the Hollow. And I certainly hope you’re up to the task. Because while I’ll never abuse you the way your mother did, I have no problem becoming your worst nightmare.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

I wake to golden sunlight pouring in through the skylight above the bed, blankets tangled around me and forming a cozy cocoon.

For a moment, I forget where I am. Regaining my bearings seems like a mistake, as the instant I do, the hollow ache that overtakes my chest dims the cheery, almost boastful morning light.

Hollow.

The Hollow.

With the pine-and-coffee scented air filling my head, yesterday's events come crashing back to me in flashes.

I'm married. To a werewolf. Uninvited vampires attended our wedding.

Oh, and apparently the key to saving the entire supernatural world relies on my ability to navigate the insanely dangerous, in-between realm.

Awesome.

I sit up against the headboard and do my best to tamp down the dread that immediately rushes up to greet me.

My bridal gown is draped over the back of the executive desk chair tucked against the

sleek desk, like Mr. Werewolf tackles tricky spreadsheets and mergers in his spare time.

With the muddied hem and the zipper in the back slightly puckered from my struggle with it, the ivory garment looks a little worse for wear.

Much like me, I suppose.

On the nightstand, a fork lies licked clean next to the empty Tupperware that once held the only good part of the reception—cake. I didn't cry while I ate it, but only because I was too tired to manage both at the same time.

I strain my ears, listening for sounds of movement. Last night I heard each time Diego tossed and turned, but the cabin is quiet now.

With a big stretch, I climb out of bed, groaning at how sore the arches of my feet are. My neck and shoulders are stiff as well, every part of my body reminding me that yesterday was long and hellacious.

The throb at my temples flares to life again, a punishing reminder of what attempting to peek into the Hollow will do.

Tomorrow, you and I begin figuring out how to navigate the Hollow...

While I'll never abuse you the way your mother did, I have no problem becoming your worst nightmare .

That's the thing with people who threaten and use brute force. They think their form of motivation is okay, no matter how damaging to the person they're ordering around.

Strange as it sounds, sometimes I'd take the physical over the psychological. The

sting of a slap fades within twenty to thirty minutes. Words that slice and shred leave internal scars that'll gnaw at me forever.

And last night, my groom told me I belonged to him, adding he'd allow my feelings, and capped it all off with a threat.

Honeymoon, my ass.

Maybe next time I'll register for wolfsbane, crossbows, and silver daggers. Not that I'm planning on marrying another werewolf ever again. I don't even want to be married to the one whose house I'm living in.

Cautiously, I pad downstairs, clinging to the handrail and taking the steps one by one.

Diego's gruff voice drifts through my brain, another one of his gems from last night: Don't fall would be my advice.

I certainly wouldn't. Not through the gap in the stairs and not for him. Stupid jerk, making me feel like his magical possession, as if he can just point me and shoot.

There's no sign of Diego, but the couch bears his faint indentation.

Giant-ass werewolf. I hope his neck is permanently kinked.

The door swings open, sending a stripe of sunshine and a puff of fresh mountain air into the room. Diego steps inside, broad shoulders nearly grazing the frame on either side. From the forest to the spacious lodge to his house, he tends to fill every space like all the oxygen inside belongs to him.

He obviously thinks he owns everything.

If he thinks I'm going to kowtow to him and his damp hair and dark jeans. That just because his simple white T-shirt stretches tight across firm pecs and...where was I again?

It's deeply unfair how attractive he is for someone who's been grumbling about his obligations to me and his pack since we met.

"I made coffee," he says as he passes by me, rounding the granite-topped island counter and stepping into the kitchen.

I study the strong line of his back as he opens and closes a cupboard, withdrawing a mug. Pretty sure I saw a glimpse of plates and bowls inside, too, so I make a mental note that's where they are.

He fills the mug with coffee from the pot, releasing more of its delicious roasted scent, and as I move to pour my own, he hands the mug he just filled to me. "Figured you could use an energy boost as much as I needed one after yesterday."

Doing my best to hide my suspicion, I take the proffered mug.

I sip slowly, peering over the rim at him. "You wouldn't try to poison me, would you?"

"Not until after you get the Blood Loom," he deadpans, but I wouldn't doubt there's some truth to the statement as well.

Honestly, the coffee's so good I might risk it.

I don't miss the perusal of his eyes as they rove over me, snagging on my chest. Right, I'm not wearing a bra.

My nipples are standing at full attention, too, only getting harder as his pupils dilate. He scowls as if he wasn't just checking me out, like he sees me and likes what he sees, but he also doesn't know what to do about it.

Just ravish me already.

Not sure where that brazen thought came from, because it's absolutely not what I want. It's the magical vows and the bond, and if I had my way, I'd be rid of it.

Unfortunately, I've never been someone who gets what she wants.

I do my best to make the most out of it instead. And if push comes to shove, I suppose I could make the most of having Diego over me and inside of me, delivering punishment and pleasure with that insanely ripped body and his infuriating tongue.

His Adam's apple bobs, and since I shouldn't be the only horny one in the room, I set my mug on the counter and boost myself up on it. Then I let my bare legs swing, experiencing a thrill when he can't stop looking at them.

With a grunt, he turns and grabs cereal boxes and oatmeal packets from the cupboard next to the fridge. "Eat up. Once you're finished with your breakfast, I've arranged a place for us to train. Somewhere quiet, away from the others."

"Let me guess," I say, enjoying this game more than I expected. "A dark, creepy forest?"

"Close. It's got a spring. So, I'd say more refreshing than creepy."

"Refreshing sounds..." I almost say refreshing, but that's a given. "Nice."

He slams the boxes of cereal down next to my thigh, all the humor drained out of the

room with the angry sound. “It’s not about a nice setting, Natalia. It’s about survival. Yours. Mine. Everyone’s.”

I hate how the weight of that sits so neatly on my shoulders. Like it was meant to yoke me to this man and a pack that would sooner burn me at the stake than accept or protect me.

The rest of my coffee gets downed in a scalding gulp. I set the empty mug in the sink to my side and leap off the counter, wincing again at my sore limbs and feet.

I pause next to Diego, going so far as to pat those strong pectoral muscles I got lost in admiring. “Gee, thanks for the reminder. In the few hours I’ve been married to you and threatened by vampires, I almost forgot that I’m now responsible for every supernatural being’s destiny.”

“You’re welcome,” he snarks back, and I grit my teeth so hard I might’ve cracked a molar.

“Fuck you, buddy,” I say, anger unfurling and pumping through my veins.

“Not right now, babe. Like I said, we’ve got a busy day.” He looms over me, not a single compromising line in his body. “But don’t you worry your pretty little head, that’s coming.”

My breath leaves me in a whoosh, my heart ceasing its beats as he leans closer.

He lifts a lock of my hair and winds it around his finger. “And when I do fuck you, you won’t be calling me buddy. You’ll be crying out my name, begging me for mercy.”

CHAPTER NINE

The forest is quiet this morning—too quiet. As if even wildlife knows something big and dangerous is about to happen.

Natalia grabbed the oh-shit handle or braced a hand on the glovebox a few times, but other than that, she's remained stony and silent.

From there, we hiked another couple of miles, through thick underbrush practically undisturbed by man, until we crested a peak that allowed us to see the entire valley.

I reach down and extend a hand to Natalia, a gesture of goodwill—along with a pinch of genuine concern for the fragile human body she has to navigate the world in—fully expecting her to ignore it like she's done every other time I offered assistance.

Evidently, brewing coffee is welcome, but a hand-up is?—

To my surprise, she slaps her palm in mine, and through ragged breaths, asks, “Are we almost...” Wheeze. “There yet?”

“Just as soon as I pull you up this ridge.” Increasing my grip on her hand, I haul her to me with extra gusto.

Only realizing I've underestimated how much she weighs as she slams into my chest, the fingernails of her free hand digging into the muscle of my shoulder. “I was going to make some joke about how they'd never find my...”

As she works to stabilize her center of gravity, her breasts smoosh up against my chest. Then I'm staring down at the cleavage the V-neck of her black tank top hinted at, my throat completely dry.

“Whoa, find my body, even before all the hiking.” She narrows eyes the color of that neon green moss that grows on the north sides of rocks and trees on me, and my heart gallops even harder and faster.

“If you made me hike this insanely rocky hill to kill me, not only is that next-level evil, I'll also come back and haunt you forever. Just saying.”

That, I didn't expect.

Same way I didn't mean to soften toward her so fast. I tamp down every squishy, weak emotion—as well as my urge to wrap her in my arms—shame rising up and overtaking the rest of my traitorous desires.

In a perfect world, my wife and I would get along and be on the same team. I could admire her incredible sense of humor and we'd trust each other and all that other happy shit.

But at the end of the day, she's still a witch.

A marriage in name is all this'll ever be, so there's no use pretending it's anything more than transactional, not for either one of us.

“I've seen your kind slaughter dozens of werewolves,” I say.

“Women and children in their beds. An entire village burned to the ground.”

The screams that replay in the back of my mind still haunt me, my brain forever

trying to sort out which screams came from my mother, my little sisters, my brother. As if that would make it better, or I could go back in time and save them somehow.

Rage simmers my blood and locks my jaw. “You’re the evil villains, not the other way around.”

Obviously thrown by the switch in mood, Natalia takes a giant step backward, the soles of her shoes slipping against the gravel and rock. She glares at the hand I automatically brace at her hip so she won’t fall, as if she’d rather fall down a cliff than be close to me.

Snagging hold of a tree branch, she tugs herself up higher and away from me, proving me right. “Clearly you’ve already made up your mind about who I am, so maybe I’ll just kill you then.”

I spread my arms wide, showing off the fact that I don’t need a fucking branch to hold onto and speak through clenched teeth. “You can certainly try.”

“Ugh,” she says before storming off into the trees, bushes scraping her cheeks and arms. And even as blood wells and scents the air, I tell myself I’m glad she’s hating this hike so much.

It makes it easier to hate her.

We maneuver our way around rocky crags and knotted tree branches to finally crest the summit. Here, the air is cooler and dense with dew and the scent of pine, damp earth. Natalia’s unique sweet scent swirls into the mix, invading my head and scrambling my thoughts.

Not only do I wish she looked more like a crone with green skin and a wart on her nose, the least she could do is to stop smelling so damn intoxicating.

As we reach the tippy-top and the ground flattens out, Natalia stops short, a gasp falling from parted lips.

A small spring gurgles down the other side, happily carrying water in a wandering path to the valley below.

“It’s beautiful,” she says. Then, without looking at me. “And I’m just talking aloud, not talking to you, so don’t go thinking we’re fine.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” I grouse. I bite back a retort about keeping her thoughts inside her head if she doesn’t want me to hear them, but it’s counterproductive to our mission. If I want this over and done with—and I do—it’s best to just help her navigate the Hollow and get on with my life.

Which was always going to be our life, and I’ll likely have to work out my anger issues about that in the training field.

Conall and I had trained hard when we formed the community, using broken-down vehicles to pull and tractor tires to flip.

Whether war was coming or I just needed to let off steam, pushing my body to the very brink is definitely calling my name.

“Okay, so...?” Natalia glances at me, questions swimming in her big doe eyes.

“You talking to me this time?” I ask.

Lifting her nose in the air, she strides away from me, picking her way across stones to reach the edge of the spring. She squats and runs her fingers through the water, ripples spreading over the surface.

Too bad, so sad if she thinks she's going to get quiet reflection time. That's not what we're here for, and we don't have time for me to constantly tiptoe around her feelings. "Pick up anything? With your...life force shit?"

"Yes," she says. "A school of brook trout, a few bluegill fish, snails, a pair of newts, and a whole mess of water fleas."

For a moment I just blinked at her, not sure what it all meant. "Okay, so that tells us what?"

"That you've brought me to a mountain spring."

Jutting my jaw, I peer down at her, fighting my urge to shake information from her like a coconut from a tree. "We can do this the easy way or the hard way."

"Wrong." Shaking droplets of water from her fingers, Natalia pushes to her feet.

"This mission is going to be the hard way, whether it involves getting in and out of the Hollow, or dealing with you and your sour temper. If you're set on making it more miserable, though, go ahead.

As I'm quickly learning, it doesn't get much worse than being married off to a werewolf. "

I reach out and catch her chin in my hand, not bothering to be as gentle as I normally am with her. "Trust me, it can get much worse. And if any of my people die because the princess was too afraid to break a nail rather than dig in and get it done, I'll ensure it does."

"Listen, my mom tried to beat magic out of me—or into me, as it were—and it didn't work.

All it's ever done is bottle up my powers and put me into a state of permanent freeze.

"She jerks her chin out away from me and inches it higher, a furious storm raging in her elfin features.

"So you can huff and puff and try to blow my house down, but at the end of the day, all you'll have is your own hot air."

My fists tighten one finger at a time, and I don't have a clever quip or comeback to being called the big bad wolf. If anything, I'm upset with myself that I'm not quite there on his same level.

This is what I get for being so judgmental that Conall couldn't keep his human veterinarian in line.

I've heard marriage involves compromise, so I take a stab at it. "Okay, so threats aren't helping."

"I'd actually use the word detrimental."

I simply glare. So much for compromise. Wasn't she supposed to give a little too? "I'm as unhappy as you are that we've been tied together, but I'm trying here."

"Are you?" There's a war in her eyes—fear and defiance, strength and vulnerability.

She advances a step, until the toes of her sneakers bump mine.

"Because you tell me you're not going to abuse me like my mother did, then you threaten me every step of the way. Is that supposed to make me feel safe?"

She has a point, but she can't make me say it. When the silence stretches past the

uncomfortable point, I settle for a grunt. There. Look at me being all considerate and accommodating.

With a long-suffering sigh and a shake of her head, Natalia's entire posture deflates. "Y'all want me to abandon my body here in this realm and navigate one known only in twisted fairytales and nightmares."

She jabs a finger to my chest, that fire within her flaring hotter and higher. "My magic requires leaving my body behind, while the entire time, my survival instincts scream I'm in danger. How the hell am I supposed to concentrate with all of that going on?" Another jab of her finger. "Huh?"

I'm fairly sure she's not actually asking.

Guilt seeps in, weighing down my limbs and feet.

"Have you ever been so afraid that your entire body just freezes?" she asks with a slight crack in her voice. "So afraid that your breath and your thoughts abandon you, to the point you begin to question your will to live?"

Unfortunately, I do. My throat tightens with the memory, those same screams I heard before. Only this time, Natalia seems to want an answer, so I go ahead and give it to her. "Yes."

Her delicate eyebrows scrunch together, the answer clearly not one she expected.

"It's been a long time, but yes, when I was a boy." I don't elaborate. I won't, not ever.

Natalia's voice softens, a hint of genuine understanding flickering in her eyes. "Do you think you could ground yourself in that state? Because I've read dozens of books

on meditation and centering yourself, even devouring ridiculous tomes on the occult from witches throughout time...”

I feel my lip curl, my sneer coming on before I can stop it.

“When I was a little girl, I got this glimpse into another world that drained me of every ounce of happiness I’d ever felt, and trust me, I didn’t have much to start with. Not with my mother and the crushing weight of her disappointment leaving me so sad and depressed.”

She sucks in a deep breath, the fear wafting off her sharp enough I can taste it. “Andromeda ordered me to keep going deeper into that real—to let go and give in. But every cell in my body shouted there wasn’t a tether strong enough in the world to keep me from getting lost.”

“I’m strong enough,” I promise her, and I can’t explain how I know, but I resolve right then and there not to let her down—not when it comes to anchoring her to the real world, where I also vow to do a better job of keeping her safe.

She’s shaking her head again, and I do my best not to be offended.

But then her eyes lock on mine, and I see the tiniest sliver of an opening.

Pouring reassurance into her with my eyeballs, I throw open the doors on the mating bond. Primitive and all-consuming, my urge to protect her and claim her as mine rumbles through me and vibrates the ground beneath our feet.

Natalia’s mouth drops open, forming the perfect O, and a noise that sounds exceedingly

sexual pierces the air. Her lashes flutter closed as she sways in my direction, fingers

wrapping around my biceps, her pulse steadily increasing as her blood pumps hotter.

We both get a jolt like we've completed a current of electricity that can't help but flow, until even my teeth feel as supercharged as a car battery.

"I...can't...let go," she says.

"I can, but I won't." I lock eyes with her again, but this time, I let my walls down a couple of inches. In the end, we want the same thing, for both of our people to survive. "I promise."

Resolve bleeds into her features, and she gives a sharp nod. "Okay then. Let's get started for real."

CHAPTER TEN

At my feet, the water babbles away cheerily, unaware we're standing on the precipice of war.

"It's hard to explain to someone else," I say to Diego, attempting not to focus on the feel of his hard muscles against my back or the fingers loosely wrapped around my hip. "Did you ever see those pictures that'd pop out at you if you relaxed your eyes just right?"

"I hated those," he says, and I bite back a grin. Of course he did. They required patience, and he so clearly doesn't have any.

"Okay, think of it like a 3D movie—every dude loves those."

"You don't like 3D movies?" His surprise rings through the question, as if I've said something crazy like I hate chocolate or something.

"It's the glasses, and then I get headaches and a little motion sickness, and that's not the point.

The point is, I have to sort of find the edges of the universe and pull them apart.

In the exact, right place" Even the explanation was complicated.

"Before I could sort out the threads, it was more like infrared goggles. See the fish in the stream?"

Brook trout dart between stones, silvery flashes just beneath the surface. Some kind of mayfly hovers in a fluttering dance above the spring. Wildflowers in every hue bloom defiantly around us. “Yeah.”

“I can sense their lifeforce, along with the grass and the trees and the insects and every crawly and creepy creature in the forest, each of them like little glowing heartbeats.”

“I can do that with my heightened sense of sight and sound.”

I hope he sees and hears my irritation. “Well then, it sounds like you can find your own way into the Hollow.”

I begin to pull away, and he tightens his grip on my hip.

That huffing and puffing he likes to pretend he doesn't do happens, warming the nape of my neck, “I was trying to be relatable.”

“You were mansplaining,” I retort, because I've been the one to give in and backtrack and apologize all my life. And on this, the day after my wedding to a werewolf I'm beginning to truly despise, I just don't feel like doing it anymore.

Guess that means the honeymoon's over.

At his low grumble of complaint, I glance over my shoulder and pin him with a glare. “Help or get out of my way.”

“I'm fucking helping, okay? You claimed we were going to get started, and I'm still waiting.”

Okay, now I'm going to straight-up murder him—that's how this honeymoon

officially ends. I'll be the lady grinning and singing country songs about killing dudes who deserved it while rotting away in my cell.

It'd be one in Mother's basement, I remind myself with a shudder as I quickly recompose myself.

From now on, I'll just ignore the giant werewolf pressed against my back, firm fingers digging into my skin, heated breath, and masculine cologne doing funny things to my tummy.

Without bothering to explain what I'm doing, I close my eyes, shutting out the sense of sight I relied on far too much—according to Andromeda, anyway.

Probably Diego, too, the obnoxious jackass.

I reach out again, but now it's like every creature, every tree, every blade of grass wants attention and is clamoring at me. Cracking open an eye, I see if that helps quiet some of the noise, but golden threads shimmer and surround us, immediately overwhelming me.

My breath comes out in shallow gasps, leaving me dizzy.

Diego's fingers seem to twitch reflexively. "Are you okay?"

That punishing headache that throbbed to life last night renews its angry pounding. Why is it that the one thing I used to be able to do is betraying and punishing me?

"It's too loud," I say, wincing and bringing my fingertips to massage my temples.

Diego's hand remains firm at my waist, all my blood rushing there and getting totally carried away.

I try again, closing my eyes and inhaling deeply, but the scent of damp pine and a fat frog sunning on a rock, amplifying his croak through his vocal sac, takes center stage.

“Focus,” Diego says, his low voice vibrating from his chest to my back.

“Really, that’s it?” I mutter. “You’re really bad at pep talks.”

“Yeah, well. I’m not here to coddle you. I’m here to keep you safe.”

I can’t find any stillness, and if I’m going to be tugging apart the fabric of the universe,

I need stillness. “Do you seriously think I’m not trying? We came to the most untamed part of the forest, where everything’s teeming with life, and there are a thousand things pulling at me.”

“Oh, so you think you’d focus better in the middle of town, with all the hustle and bustle of people and cars? A dozen or so strangers insisting on introducing themselves to you?”

“I don’t know why I bother speaking to you at all, as it’s clearly not helping.” But if I did, I’d say strangers introducing themselves sounds nice.

“Much like you, I’m trying.”

Anger is now the only thread I can grab hold of, and I’d like to wind it up and use it to strangle the cantankerous werewolf behind me.

I feel the hot breath he blows from his nostrils, his frustration as apparent as mine.

“How do I help?”

Damn it, now I'd rather he go back to being mean, because I don't know and that makes me feel inadequate.

"I'm struggling to stay grounded in my body.

I start sensing all the life forces, and my self-preservation instinct starts squawking, and just everything .

To the point I no longer feel able to access the magic inside of me."

Diego's quiet for a moment, a blank space in a sea of overstimulation. Given my mother would've used the minutes to berate me and point out how much control she had of her magic, I find it preferable, ineffectual or not.

"Okay, so if you're in your head," he says next to my ear in a contemplative tone, "we've got to figure out how to get you to come back to your body."

Ever so slowly, he drags the callused pads of his fingertips down my arm. "To stop thinking so much."

The other noises of the forest fade, every ounce of my concentration switching to the tingly trail he's now swiping up my inner arm. The beats of my heart come faster and faster, not waiting for one to finish before the other begins, until they're right on top of each other.

That constant hum of magic twines with the mating bond and crackles through the air, evolving into a lively but steady frequency I can set my inhales and exhales to.

Another gentle pass with the pads of his fingers, this time from my elbow to the inside of my wrist, where he lingers. Using his thumb, he swipes over my pulse point again and again.

His touch shouldn't help. If anything, I'd expect it to distract me.

But it doesn't. Diego centers and grounds me, just like the vampires claimed he would.

A hint of irritation attempts to rise—I didn't want them to be right—but then the hand Diego had planted on my hip skirts around, my heated desire pooling low in my belly.

From there he gets a little bolder, fingertips grazing the waistband of my shorts, a few inches higher than where I desperately need them.

Because now all I can concentrate on is the intensifying throb between my thighs.

It's not even like he's trying to seduce me, but my body didn't get the memo, and it's about to get carried away.

Let's start ripping at the seam of reality. It's not like anything could go wrong.

I do what I explained to Diego earlier, letting my vision go hazy so I can pry apart the effervescent framework that's its own living, breathing thing.

The threads respond instantly, each fiber suddenly coming into sharp focus, their lifeforce glow amplified.

This time when I reach out, the threads don't shy away or disappear. They start unraveling one by one, unzipping a hole in this world to reveal another.

An extra fine strand in the middle floats toward me and beckons, as if it's been waiting and can't take it anymore.

My center of gravity shifts as Diego lowers his mouth to the pulse point at the base of my throat, right where it connects to my shoulder.

Then he gives the spot a languid lick.

Heat spirals through me, my magic rushing up in a way I've never experienced before, and suddenly the entire forest fades to the background.

I'm no longer standing next to a stream; my feet are planted on dusty gray ground, instead.

"You're doing it," Diego murmurs, low in my ear, his voice so close and yet so echoey and far at the same time.

I draw in a trembling breath and glance around, but it's as if someone's blotted out the sun. Shadowy tree branches reach toward a starless midnight sky, and I tell myself the figures that seem to melt in and out of relief are merely a trick of the light.

Except there doesn't seem to be any light.

"No arrows to point my way? A smoking caterpillar, perhaps?" I ask, my voice muffled and not entirely sounding like mine. "Absolem?"

Weird.

I swear the void hushes me, hissing in anger.

Something moves.

Not fast, not slow. Just there and then somewhere else.

Slithering through the dark. Watching and waiting.

I hear the scream before I feel it being ripped from my throat, as if discovering fear's come for me before I even know I'm afraid.

Wait, what?

My thoughts don't make sense, and my body's not reacting like usual.

Eyes blink at me, two analyzing slits of white. Then a mouthful of teeth opens wide as the shadow with eyes charges.

I go to scream, but I'm already screaming.

And just like that, I'm yanked out of the darkness and returned to a forest in eastern Massachusetts.

Diego's arms are already around me, lowering me gently to the ground. He crouches beside me, his eyes searching mine. "What did you see?"

My heart thunders in my chest like I've run miles. Sweat slicks my skin. "Trees. Shadows. Eyes watching. Darkness for miles and miles."

"Any signs of the Blood Loom?"

I shake my head as my lungs continue to heave with ragged breaths—I can't catch up on oxygen, no matter how much I inhale. "There's something else," I manage, and panic digs in its icy claws. "Old magic."

A few more seconds of blinking and rubbing at my eyes, and the darkness eclipsing my vision finally gives way to daylight. The darkness that remains clinging to my

soul, however, isn't fazed by the sunlight in the slightest.

Now I know why they call it the Hollow.

Wrapping my arms around myself fails to repress my shiver, and my eyes seek out Diego's, only to find his so steady on me already.

"Whatever it is, it wants me to know it's watching me," I rasp, my internal temperature dropping even lower, the hot and cold fluctuations hell on my nervous system. "Kicking me out like that was a warning. It's telling me that whatever I'm trying to take, it's not going to let go without a fight."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The compound doesn't get many peaceful nights anymore. Between vampire threats, a hex that took away our regenerative properties, and a total change-up in leadership, the past couple of months have been so thick with tension that I'm half-expecting someone to snap.

It'll probably be me, given my recent luck.

We didn't get much celebrating done at the wedding, either, our chance to let loose interrupted. Which is why, a week later, Conall and Kerrigan decided to throw together a casual weenie roast in one of the nearby clearings.

Grilled meat, bottles of beer passed around, and a roaring bonfire. There are packages of marshmallows, chocolate, and graham crackers on the table, many a parent telling their pups they'll have to eat their dinner before getting their sticky dessert.

Lights with fat bulbs are strung between trees—given our supernatural sight renders them useless or too bright, I'm guessing that was Kerrigan's addition.

Point is, the entire scene radiates a chill vibe that lowers my blood pressure and makes it feel like we're just a bunch of friendly neighbors, out enjoying a perfect summer evening.

I spent the last two hours dealing with pack matters and a meeting that couldn't have been an email, but goddamn did it go on and on and make me wish I could send everyone an email. One that said: I make the rules, and I don't want to hear any

whining about it.

I sent a text to Natalia, letting her know the meeting was running long. I added that I could send someone to escort her to the party, or I could come collect her myself a little later, but she hadn't replied.

Maybe that was just as well.

I make a slow lap around the perimeter, exchanging pleasantries and ensuring there's nothing out of order before drifting closer to the fire. There's happy chatter and laughter and an underlying hum of contentment I haven't felt in too damn long.

I spot Kerrigan tossing her head back in laughter while Conall tries to defend himself from whatever teasing she's laid on him. It hits me then, how easily they fit. How different things could be if my life had taken a different path.

When I volunteered to play groom so Conall could be with his soul mate, I meant it. Seeing them now, I'd do it again and again, no matter how many forks in the road it cost me.

But as much as I claimed to never want marriage and a family that could eventually be ripped away from me, their love is also a reminder of what I've given up.

Yeah, but would you really give up Natalia?

A voice roars from deep within, furious at the mere idea. Even though it's against my own brain, I do my best to argue that this was supposed to be a different reality, in an alternate timeline.

The bond we forged at the wedding ceremony won't let me even consider it, though.

Yep. That's all it is. Nothing to do with how incredible she felt in my arms.

Or that whenever we attempted to break down all the walls the Hollow threw up, it felt like an entirely different world. One where we still sniped at each other the entire hike, but

standing linked together on that precipice of a mountain top, we felt like a Team. Like that us against the world shit I've heard so much about but always failed to buy.

Until I saw it happen to my best friend.

Tyrese nods at my approach.

Nissa cradles her belly at his side, probably only weeks from giving birth now, and that little life—along with theirs and the entire pack's—rests on my shoulders.

“Glad to see you could make it,” Tyrese says. He drapes an arm around his wife's shoulders. “I figured you'd be busy with the witch in the honeymoon suite.”

“Be nice.” Nissa thwacks him in the chest, saving me from having to.

Wait, I want to do the thumping, and I'm not even sure which kind I'm talking about anymore.

My skin prickles at a familiar honeysuckle vanilla scent that filters through the campfire smoke and the rest of the crowd. I'm like Pepe Le Pew floating after his lady love, a sexy cat he honestly has no chance with.

Shit. That comparison feels more and more apt by the second.

Figures I'd end up being some overly confident skunk who drools over some woman,

calling her “ma chérie” while unaware of my own powerful stench.

Several pack members pass by with nods or raised bottles. I bob my head and mumble replies and lift my own beer in response—but I don’t take my eyes off the blonde at the edge of the circle, her features illuminated in flickering waves as she steps closer to the glow of the firelight.

The magnetic pull in the center of my chest grows impossible to ignore, and then I’m excusing myself and making my way across the space to intercept my beautiful bride.

And for the record, referring to her as “beautiful” isn’t me being a softie or any sort of admission of feelings—any idiot could see it as well as I could, she was a certified knockout.

“Hey,” I say as I approach her, suddenly struggling for words. “Glad you could make it.”

“Yeah, well.” Natalia shuffles her feet, her gaze remaining fixed on the motion. “I’ve never been to a bonfire or had s’mores before, so I couldn’t resist.”

I know I’m looking at her like she started speaking another language, but I continue to stare far past the polite range.

She hugs one arm around her middle, fingers wrapping around the other above the elbow. “What?”

“Sorry. Camping is such a big part of our life and always has been.” Despite telling myself to play it cool, I can feel my eyebrows scrunching together. “You’ve never had s’mores?”

“Never,” she says. “I always wanted to try one, but my mother said fires were for

cauldrons.”

I honestly have no idea whether she’s kidding or not. About the cauldron. The claim about never having a s’more rings true, but there’s always an erratic spike in her pulse when she speaks about Andromeda. “Let’s get you a good stick and roast you some marshmallows.”

Natalia shuffles a couple of steps closer and rocks onto the balls of her feet, fiddling with one of her golden curls. “Aren’t you going to tell me I need to roast a wiener first?”

“Trust me, I’d never tell you such a thing.” Flashing her a lopsided smile, I place a protective hand over my package, adding an extra barrier to the denim. “Call it a hunch, but I think you might consider it a challenge.”

She laughs full out, this intoxicating noise of pure joy and, fuck me , I’m going to spend the entire night trying to earn another. “And who says you’re not smart?”

“Nobody better be saying that.” I crack my knuckles in mock threat.

“You know that a show of brute force isn’t exactly pleading a good case for you, right?”

“Then I suppose I’ll use that brute force to help you make dessert.”

“Oh, it’s undeniably going to be my dinner, too.” She hooks her fingers in the crook of my arm like it’s the most natural thing in the world, but the humor fades from her features as she looks around the fire.

I follow suit, a second behind, and a low rumble vibrates from my throat at what I see.

Glares.

Resentment and animosity.

If anyone deserves to feel that way, it's me, so they can get the fuck over it, and quick.

I raise my voice to be heard over the din of conversation and roar of the fire.

“Natalia is my wife and my mate, and she's to be treated with the utmost respect.

She's under our protection.” Letting the gold roll over my eyes, I go ahead and infuse the full alpha stare that requires submission.

“Under my protection. She's one of ours now, and anyone who has a problem with that is free to take it up with me. ”

Silence stretches out for a handful of seconds, the crackling of the fire and breeze in the trees the only sound.

An affirmative verbalization from the group accompanies nods before they return to their own business, as it should be.

Placing my hand over the hand Natalia keeps at my elbow, I stride toward the table with all the food.

“I appreciate you sticking up for me, but I doubt that'll make me any more popular,” she says.

“This isn't a popularity contest. It's pack mentality, and I'm the leader, so they can deal with it.”

“Pack mentality, huh?” She picks her way over stones, leaning more heavily against my side and relying more on me in a way that makes me feel ten feet tall. “And how, pray tell, do you expect them not to hate me when you feel the same way?”

I come to a dead stop, whirring to face her so quickly that I brace my hands at her waist just in case.

Also because my hands go there, okay?

“I don’t...” The assuring words I mean to say won’t come. “...hate you exactly.”

She laughs again, a little sardonically, and I frown, because it’s definitely at my expense. “Sorry. It’s just that you can’t even convince yourself of it. You certainly didn’t convince me.”

A desperate sense of urgency inundates my system.

The next thing I know, my hand is on her cheek. Strands of her hair swirl in the wind, silkily grazing my arm.

God, I ache to drive my fingers into the gold, fisting the strands and angling her lips to open up beneath mine.

Our mouths are mere inches apart, her minty fresh breath indicating she recently brushed her teeth. With her body becoming pliant, a certain part of me is growing hard, threatening to show everyone precisely what this woman is doing to me.

I dip my head, leaning dangerously close to the gorgeous witch and brushing my mouth over hers. I leave it there for a beat, savoring her gasp and her soft curves before moving my lips to her ear. I nip lightly at the shell, grinning at the scent of her arousal dampening her panties.

“I don’t hate you,” I whisper in her ear.

Shallow breaths leave her chest bumping against mine, in and out, up and down.
Bump, bump, bump.

“Believe me now?” I ask.

“Everyone calls me Talia, by the way,” she says, her pink tongue darting out to lick her lips, and there’s no way she doesn’t feel my erection growing against her belly.
“As for the rest...we’ll see.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

The fire's calmed to a low, flickering blaze, the kind that settles into the bones and makes it easy to forget we're being hunted.

Diego and I are sitting on a large, flat rock a few feet from the pit, our knees brushing as sparks dance up toward the dark sky, popping like little stars before disappearing.

He holds a perfectly toasted marshmallow at the end of his stick, rotating it with a kind of reverence. "The coals are the best," he says. "They give the marshmallow that perfect toast without lighting it on fire."

I raise an eyebrow at the towering inferno in front of us. "Then why have a raging bonfire?"

Cockiness packs every inch of the grin he flashes me. "Well, because the thing about us werewolves—we're of the opinion bigger is better."

A laugh spills free, so there'll be no playing it cool. There's something about tonight that has me feeling carefree in a way I rarely get to be. It feels like a real party, an activity I've so rarely been allowed to participate in.

We celebrated sanguine moons and took advantage of their timing and impact on our magic.

But I was home-schooled, my subjects predominantly Herbology, Astrology, Spellwork, Hexes, and Advanced Curses, Warding, and an hour of Astral Projection,

followed by at least an hour lecture in Ways I Disappoint My Mother.

Shaking off that memory, I do my best to hold onto the happy. “Okay, but as you’re puffing up your chest and showing off how manly your big bonfire makes you, you should also know you have melted chocolate, like, all over your face.”

I gesture toward him with my half-eaten s’more, licking chocolate off my own lip. “And it’s not exactly giving off scary-alpha vibes. Just saying.”

“Honey, when you’re as big and tough as I am,” he says, placing a proud hand in the center of his chest, “I don’t need to bother giving off scary-alpha vibes. I simply do.”

Juggling my melty dessert to my other hand, I shake my head and do my best to act unaffected. “Whatever, tough guy.”

“Hey”—Diego wipes at his lips with his thumb, missing the smear of chocolate in the corner entirely— “You’re looking at my mouth, aren’t you?”

“Oh, is that how you wield your power?”

The log we’re perched on rolls the tiniest bit as he shifts closer. “Nah. It’s a rather effective distraction technique, though.”

I’m about to ask how, despite the fact that I’m very much distracted, when he lunges forward and takes a bite out of my melty square of deliciousness.

“Ah! Thief!”

“You hesitated. I didn’t think you were going to finish it.” He unabashedly licks his lips, and now I’m recalling having them pressed against the column of my neck in the forest.

Fine. Maybe he did have a point about his methods of distraction. While I loathed the hikes and overwhelming feelings of failure of our outings, my entire body anticipated the moment he'd distract me with the callused pads of his fingers or kiss my neck.

“I guess I missed that chapter in the supernatural etiquette handbook,” I say. “Weird because Andromeda made me read it front to back, too.”

Now I'm the one earning chuckles from him, and butterflies swirl in my gut.

For a while, I didn't think I came with those—or that maybe my mother had beaten them out of me. A funny thing happens when your nerves are always cranked so high. You forget they're capable of attraction and excitement and not just compliance and fear.

I'm obsessed with the moment he'll press those lips to mine, while afraid it'll be before I'm ready or after we've had our third magical, shifting child.

Diego lifts his metal stick, eyeing the pair of perfectly toasted marshmallows at the end. He snags a piece of chocolate from the unwrapped foil at his side, along with a sheet of graham crackers.

His big hands and long, strong fingers are precise in a way I didn't expect. He builds an oversized, four-square, two marshmallow s'more, the firelight flickering across the unyielding line of his jaw and ridged slope of his nose.

Then he breaks the entire thing in half, crumbs flying, sticky marshmallow goo spilling out the sides in melty threads, and hands one half to me.

Rather than demurely showing him the last bite I still have left in my hand, I shove it in my mouth and accept the warm, fresh offering.

His fingers graze mine.

My breath catches.

I nearly choke on my s'more, my inhale sending crumbs to the back of my throat, and it takes every ounce of self-restraint not to cough cracker bits all over him.

I manage to shove it down, and he grins like he didn't notice the struggle.

Dare I say he might not even hesitate if I actually required the Heimlich maneuver. Funny how big that feels.

"Thank you," I manage, once I've ensured everything goes down the right tube and I can still breathe through my windpipe.

As we sit by the fire, licking sticky remnants of the confection from our fingers, I find myself staring at his mouth again.

Great, now I'm reliving how he looked at me earlier as he leaned in close, lips brushing mine so softly it almost felt as if I imagined the featherlight contact.

I don't hate you, he whispered, and I almost believed him.

The thing is, I want to believe him, and that's the most surprising and unnerving thing of all.

Would it be so bad to let myself believe I could be accepted for who I truly am at my core, even if only for a moment?

Just Talia, a girl who connected with the critters in the forest more than most people, who loved botany not because plants could be used in potions, but because they were

just really fucking cool.

Like how calendula petals can speed up healing or how plantain leaves pull out poison and calm angry skin.

From moths and butterflies and even Asian longhorned beetles, with their bright spots and spindly antennae, I could lie in the dirt all afternoon.

My friends were raccoons, foxes, and the fisher cats that freaked out local residents because they sound like a child screaming in the middle of the night.

Hell, I'd rather hang with a stinky skunk than most people, and that went double if we were talking witches.

There wasn't a number high enough for Mother.

Since I tended to wander and lose track of time outdoors, my mom began keeping me indoors, trying to mold me into something rigid and refined—so determined to shove me into a box I didn't fit in.

A prison from which I could only glimpse the outside world.

Even though I never understood why, I swear she was jealous and vengeful against my love of nature and the way it'd always called to me.

Those rare stretches of solitude were the only times I felt like I belonged, when the threads of the universe would wrap around me like we were one without beginning or end.

Then I'd be called home to be surrounded by women who called me "sister" but always made me feel alone. My mother welcomed and allowed them mistakes and

weaknesses she never accepted from me, not even on my worst days.

Great Goddess, I was so starved for affection that at the tiniest show of it—even from a werewolf—melts me like the puffed-up marshmallows melted the square of chocolate against the graham cracker lid.

“What do you think?” Diego asks, and I’m so terrified for a moment he’s read what I’m thinking that my cheeks burn with embarrassing heat. “Is dessert enough for you? Or would you like to roast up a few hot dogs for dinner?”

I blink at him, a softer, more affectionate warmth pouring through me like honey.

“Hey, you guys coming to the ax throwing contest, or what?” Kerrigan asks from behind us, with her hand linked in Conall’s elbow. She’s looking at me like she actually wants me to come, which seems unfathomable after what my mother did to her.

After what I did to her.

Although to be fair, Kerrigan had also chucked a heavy silver collar at my head that knocked me silly.

Diego raises an eyebrow at me, making it clear I get to decide whether to stay here by the bonfire or go watch a bunch of werewolves flex their muscles in a machismo display.

Come on now, there’s not really a choice here. I’m only human. Albeit with the blood of witches running through my veins.

I’m also not the type of girl to dig in my heels and fight the inevitable—I’ve learned through the years it’s a painful lesson in futility. I only get one life to live, even if it

involves being in an arranged marriage to a werewolf who maybe doesn't totally hate me.

Which is why I decide that at least for tonight, it'll be okay to pretend I'm just an ordinary girl, out on a real date with a super-hot guy and his group of ludicrously ripped, werewolf friends.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

By the time we make it to the clearing where the ax throwing contest is underway, the whole damn pack's gathered around. Laughter, razzing, and the thunk of blades hitting wood fill the clearing, loud and unguarded. Not to mention soothing in a way I didn't expect.

Ahh, normalcy.

Show-off that he is, Conall's throwing one-handed, Kerrigan tucked against his side, beer bottle in the other hand.

He's got to be twenty yards from the target, twice as far as we typically throw from.

As if that's not enough of a challenge for him, he dips his head and kisses Kerrigan as he lets the ax fly. It lands deep inside the center of the bullseye.

Cheers, whistles, and applause ring through the impressed audience, and I notice wads of cash exchanging hands. Not sure who'd bet against him, but I'm sure that's why they'd upped the ante with the additional challenges.

That was the thing with Conall, and why Nissa and I had chosen him as the alpha of our little pack of misfits back when we were only teens. Nobody questioned his authority—not until Kerrigan showed up, anyway.

For a moment I wonder what either of us was thinking, having me challenge him for a position I didn't know what to do with. It's not that I don't have my fair share of

opinions or didn't have faith in my strength—in a lot of ways, that was all I had faith in these days.

But I wasn't showy or loud, or anything else Conall had been. If I'd known I'd be in this position, I might've given more thought to what kind of leader I wanted to be. With vampires beating down our door and a bigger war looming, all I can think is that it shouldn't be me.

Yet my pride and the surging power in my veins balk at the idea of giving it up.

If I'm being honest, part of me always wanted to go toe-to-toe with Conall, no holds barred, just to see what I was capable of.

As much as I hate to admit it, even if only in my head, I'm afraid I'll discover at the worst possible time—at the expense of my pack and family—that I wasn't meant to lead.

“Lucky shot,” I shout just to be a dick, and so that I can drown out my plaguing feelings of doubt.

Fuck that, it's not me.

Conall flips me off over his shoulder, and Kerrigan loops her arms around his neck and takes the kiss to such incendiary levels, I'm surprised the meadow doesn't burst into flames.

Although that might be a pinch of jealousy talking, as I'd love nothing more than for Natalia to do that to me.

Letting my hand rest lightly against the slight curve of her lower back, I incline my head in her direction and speak a little lower, not that everyone won't hear anyway.

“We judge by three things: distance from the target, accuracy, and depth.”

“Ah, so that’s why he’s standing so far back?” she asks.

“He’s standing that far back,” I say, raising my voice, “because he’s a cocky bastard who prides himself on never losing a match.”

Chuckles ring the semi-circle of observers.

Conall cocks back his arm, taking his sweet time aiming.

If he wanted silence for his toss, he should’ve gone already.

I cast Natalia a side-long glance to see how she’s soaking it all in, and she has the most adorable half-smile on her face. I can’t believe she’s never had a s’more before tonight.

She catches me watching and shifts nervously. “What?”

“Just watching you take it all in.”

“I’m seriously digging this, and I one hundred percent mean that. It’s the kind of thing I’ve only ever read about in books.” She cranes her neck to get a better angle of Conall’s next toss. “Not my magical textbooks, of course. But the fictional kind I snuck under my covers at night, because...”

She screws up her face, affecting a stern, uber-grammatically correct tone. “Until you learn to cast spells and astral project, Natalia, you don’t deserve to read for fun.”

Christ’s sake, her mom was a cunt.

“Anyway, go on,” she says, rubbing her hand up and down my upper arm like I might need soothing after her traumatic memory. “Tell me more about how it works.”

“You line up your shot, see?”

Conall lets the ax fly, end over end, to lodge so close to dead-center he’ll inevitably count it.

While I might’ve never challenged him for the position of alpha before it became necessary to his happiness, it doesn’t mean I’m not competitive.

Or that our battles hadn’t resulted in hits that landed way too hard.

“You want the tip to go in first,” I say.

Natalia does just a horrible job of hiding her growing smile behind her hand. “That’s the general consensus, yes.”

I nudge her side with my elbow, basking in her giggle. “Smartass.”

“It’s from reading all those books I wasn’t supposed to,” she replies, skipping a little closer to the throwing grounds and dragging me along with her.

“My turn!” Twenty-two-year-old Elias dislodges an ax from a stump and steps up to the usual line, demarcated by a row of flat white stones that glow in the moonlight. As our youngest member of the Lead Guard, he was enthusiastic in a way few of us older dudes were.

“You got this, babe!” Gabriel cheers from the sideline, even though everybody knows he doesn’t stand a real shot against Conall—not even from the closer line.

But Gabriel hollers for him like it's the Olympics, and the two of them have been training all year.

A squishy sensation I'm not accustomed to overtakes my chest as I watch the couple give each other twitterpated grins and blow kisses back and forth.

Recently official, although that hadn't exactly come as a shock to anyone who knew either of them, it was almost a tragedy before Kerrigan saved Elias's life.

Shit, now my throat's growing too tight, too.

At the reminder of the silver flash bomb and sigil trap that seared off a layer of skin and left Elias unable to regenerate, conflicting emotions arise, and every single one of them involves the witch at my side.

As much as I longed to forget who she was and bask in the fun night, the safety of every person in the compound now lands squarely on my shoulders, and I didn't want to get it wrong.

But I'd also seen how Andromeda treated Natalia—Talia. Personally, I thought Natalia suited her better. That's a name that warned me I'd never be able to have such a gorgeous creature, this woman who was far too ethereal for even Earth herself.

Most disturbing of all, however, is how much I like the idea of calling her mine.

Maybe even meaning it in the way Conall did when he'd brought the veterinarian in on one of our big pack meetings, letting gold roll over his eyes as he said, "You will give her the respect she deserves, or as I mentioned earlier, you'll have me to contend with."

The saying about it being so quiet you could hear a pin drop?

That would've been loud in comparison to the silence that followed.

Werewolves weren't exactly known for being quiet, either.

It's one of the many reasons we lived fifteen miles outside an already tiny town, where we could have acres and acres of forest to roam.

Admittedly, I'd been right there with the rest of them during that pack meeting, insisting Conall shouldn't bring in an outsider.

But I'd held Elias in my arms while he gasped and choked on his own blood.

It'd been eerily similar to the day Conall and I found the kid in the woods, severely malnourished and beaten within an inch of his life. Leaving him there to die for being gay, archaic in a way I thought we'd overcome.

Anger rises again, and the unfairness over how much pain he's experienced from such a young age has me clenching my fists at my side. It gnawed at me that we'd never found the assholes and paid them back.

The self-sabotaging urge to demand Talia help me find the witch or witches responsible for the sigil trap bubbles up.

This is why I don't get to kiss her breathless as my friends whistle and give us shit.

Why I can't call her mine or go thinking she truly is—there are simply far too many complications for that type of true-love, fairy tale nonsense.

My gaze tracks the clusters and pairs that make up the members of our pack, names rattling through my brain and responsibility stacking like bricks on my chest.

Even when Conall first agreed to marry Natalia—a foregone notion that causes a jealous flare of sizzling, bubbling heat—Kerrigan had stayed at the compound, treating every single injured werewolf who couldn't regenerate.

Even though most of the pack was still accusing her of being a witch.

She loved Conall enough to save his people, even when she didn't believe she could have him in the way she so desperately wanted.

Now those faces have turned their hate-filled leers toward my wife.

Letting my alpha power flow, I level a glare at every single sneer and disrespectful glance aimed at Natalia, until nobody dares to look our way.

Yeah. That's what I thought. Assholes.

Except I should probably point that sentiment right back at myself and make a decision already. Who was she to me? Enemy? Ally? Villain? Wife?

Shifting my weight from one foot to the other, I frown at the downer thoughts that creep up as if I'm not painfully aware of the stakes.

As if I need another reminder that I'm responsible for every person gathered around the fire and all of the people gathered to watch the ax throwing event, as well as those who stayed indoors during tonight's festivities.

It's not just about keeping the peace or enforcing rules or even about being super nice and giving a witch we barely know a chance.

It's about ensuring that none of them—her included—die.

Talia and her powers might be the only thing standing between us and a war we can't win. The other wolves didn't get a glimpse of the Hollow like I did.

Not the darkness lingering just inside, watching and waiting, clawing toward her the instant she stepped inside.

It wants her.

So do I, which is playing a huge part in my confusion and conflicted feelings.

Since I still don't know what to do with them, I decide to go my usual route. Stuff them inside, shove a lid on top, and pretend they don't exist.

It's not like I can do it forever.

But every single person in this meadow deserves a break before hell comes to greet us, be it vampires or hunters or whatever other threat is out there lying in wait.

Just for tonight, I decide to let my people laugh and drink and get a little rowdy and shout. It might be the last carefree night they get for a long, long time.

I shove up my sleeves and throw down the gauntlet. Might as well treat them to a real competition, too. I hold my hand out to my wife like we're about to fuckin' dance in some fancy ballroom. "Ready to take a spin?"

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Diego's arm snaps back, the ax a blur of metal and wood as it arcs through the air.

It lands dead center, splitting the handle of the ax Conall had lodged in the bullseye.

The crowd whoops and hollers, and Diego lifts his arms, eating up the applause and riling his audience up some more.

"Now who's the showoff?" Conall mutters from the log he's perched on next to Kerrigan, but there's a proud gleam I didn't expect after all the shit-talking they'd done when Diego told him to go ahead and leave the ax in the target so everyone could see the clear winner.

Then Diego waves me closer, signaling it's my turn.

I skip over, excitement driving my bounce and my pace. There's an itch in my palms and anxious energy coursing up and down my arms. The werewolves have shown me such a great time, I'm eager to contribute to tonight's entertainment however I can.

Someone's already dislodged Diego's ax, as well as Conall's mangled one. But there's a whole freaking pile to my left to choose from, as if they're doomsday-prepper lumberjacks.

Diego grips one of the axes below the crescent-shaped blade and extends me the handle with surprising gentleness. He's grinning ear to ear, and while we've shared some jokes and toned down the barbs this past week, he's truly in his element here.

It looks good on him, but that's sort of like saying the sun is bright.

Nudging me forward, over to the line where Elias threw from. There's a patch worn in the grass from all the werewolves who came before.

"You've got to grip it in both hands like you're swinging a bat," Diego says.

"Never swung one of those, but I get the gist."

"What kind of fucked up childhood did you have? I thought mine was bad, and you make it look like Disneyland."

I whirl around, a little too fast—it's a good thing he's got fast reflexes and brawn to spare, because he barely dodges in time. "Sorry. I just... Have you been to Disneyland?"

"No, but I can't say it's ever been a goal destination for me, even as a kid. And while I might've missed out on Little League games and high school sports after our village was destroyed, Conall, Nissa, and I built this place to ensure future generations could."

My organs go all mushy on me, as if I needed any more reasons to soften too much toward this man.

"We made it a point to ensure this village would never be destroyed like our last one was. So that we could give others that safety and assurance and strengthen our numbers after losing what was most precious to us."

The harsh words he hurled at me in the forest during our very first outing ring in my ears again, but with new meaning. I've seen your kind slaughter dozens of werewolves. Women and children in their beds. An entire village burned to the

ground.

No wonder he hates me. As curious as I am to know if it was a village on Mother Dearest's death list, I'm terrified to know.

Because I also remember the screams of women and children being burned in their beds.

That charred and choking scent that stung my nostrils and coated my lungs.

How my mother yelled at me for crying and leaving streaks of weakness in the ash on my face.

I was about ten years old, but it wasn't just that once.

It happened again and again, and after the destruction, I'd look behind me at the expanse of forest not on her war path and debate whether it'd be worth it to flee.

Given her powerful magic, she'd undoubtedly locate and punish me. I remember wondering so often as a child why she even had me; if she wouldn't be happier if I ran away?

During an ugly fight when I was fourteen years old and dared to ask, she answered in the worst possible way. I thought you'd be powerful, not some ditzy girl with her head in the clouds.

It seemed extra ironic considering that's all I've ever wanted to be—although I knew I was intelligent, if not clever enough to outmaneuver or overpower her.

Doing the grunt work of her evil bidding also made it crystal clear she only wanted me for who I could be and what I could do for her, and neither of those options was

particularly motivating.

Which was when she'd switched to inflicting physical pain.

“Okay, so no sports metaphors for you,” Diego says, yanking me back into the present, in this clearing surrounded by werewolves. And somehow, I realize I feel less afraid than I ever did around my own mother.

Diego places his hands on either side of my waist and spins me back to face the target.

The heat of his body seeps into mine as he wraps himself around me, gripping the handle of the ax just above where I've now got two hands holding tight.

“It's not so much about physical strength as physics.” He guides my arms through the motions, shifting his other hand a few inches above mine to maintain more control over the pointy end. “You're going to let gravity, momentum, and torque do the work.”

Sure. That'd work for someone like me, with twigs for arms.

Even with his help, my muscles tremble with the unwieldy weight of the full-size ax. Didn't people use hatchets nowadays?

His warm breath stirs the hair at my nape and tickles my ear, throwing my aim off completely. “Then you just let it fly.”

I heave it with all my might.

The ax thuds to the ground several feet shy of the target.

It doesn't even lodge in the ground, either, just flops over as if unimpressed.

A few chuckles echo behind us.

My cheeks flame, but I charge forward with determination and pick up the ax. I make a beeline right back to Diego and say, "That was just a warm-up and getting a feel for the space. I want to try again."

"Of course. Maybe try a little closer this time?"

"Farther back, actually."

Confusion knits his brow. "Farther up, you mean."

"Nope." I flash him a grin before I turn on my heel and head in the opposite direction of the target. "As much as I appreciate your technique, I'm gonna try one of my own."

I walk to the same line he and Conall used, gripping the handle the way he showed me and taking aim. "This is where the big boys play from, right?"

"Natalia," he says in that low, gravelly voice that never fails to make my stomach tighten. Before him, the only person to use it was my mother, and she managed to pack her disgust for me into every single letter and syllable.

Diego rolls it off his tongue, dripping with honey, even when he's irritated.

"Scoot back." I wave him toward the right so I'll have an extra wide berth. "If you're in the way, how will I hit the bullseye?"

Every single feature of his floods with skepticism.

Anticipation literally sings through my veins—this is going to be so fun, watching all their awe-struck faces.

I lift the ax over my head, then I channel magic through my arms and into my fingers. Full blast, I let it flow as I let the weapon fly.

Kind of sort of like Diego instructed, but with a shimmer of green in its wake.

It soars toward the target, the trajectory perfect to hit that red, scarred circle in the middle.

Then it veers abruptly to the left.

Gasps go up around me.

It weaves a sparkly path around trees, creating gorgeous figure eight shapes in a greenish gold, to curve around a third trunk and boomerang back around...

And lodges deep in the bullseye, splintering the wooden target clean in half. How's that for power, you cocky werewolves?

Proof that sometimes strength comes from within—that's what that is.

Only the forest has gone dead silent.

Not in that peaceful, blissful type of way, but with so much tension choking the air, nothing else dares make a sound.

I look to Diego, expecting him to be smiling, impressed, maybe a little bewildered.

But his face has transformed into an unreadable mask.

Is this that toxic masculinity I've read about? Where they can't handle a strong woman?

But wait, Nissa's hugely pregnant and still one of their top officers, so that doesn't make sense.

Dozens of wolves stare at me, eyes narrowed and lips curled with disgust. As my gaze sweeps over them, they straighten and tense their muscles.

Some of the smaller audience members back away like I'm a ticking timebomb about to explode.

Gone is the warmth of the bonfire, and I don't mean the flames. The stickiness and melty chocolate of my dessert has disappeared, licked clean not from my mouth but my display.

This serves as a perfect reminder for why I never wanted this kind of magic—why I'm extra precautionous and forever holding back a little.

Back a lot, honestly.

I really thought they'd find it funny—that's all it was supposed to be, a light-hearted trick that earned me a laugh and perhaps an ounce of respect.

The wind picks up, a cool gust that causes the leaves to shiver in the trees and raises goosebumps on my arms. It's the sort of frigidity I'm used to dealing with from my mother, and that's what hurts most of all.

I recognize the fear and the hatred it causes in others, and the entire pack is looking at me in that exact same way.

I guess it's the reminder I needed that I'm not one of them, and I never will be.

I can handle it from the rest of them, but when I seek out Diego, a muscle flexes in his jaw like he's holding himself back—like when we fight in the forest.

Still, I plead with my eyes not to leave me out here in the open by myself any longer, now suddenly the bullseye in the target of their hatred.

His gaze drops to the ground. But it's the shake of his head, like he can't believe he's married to me, that's so utterly devastating.

It's my fault for letting my guard down and thinking we could be friends—or at the very least civil.

Everyone peels off in clusters, leaving the area, until Diego and I are the only two who remain.

And I internally crumble, because that says everything.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The perimeter guards have our unexpected guest surrounded, half of them fangs and fur, with those in human form ready to transform at a moment's notice. Through their barrier of bodies, I catch a glimpse of a platinum fauxhawk glowing in the moonlight.

“Riven,” I snarl, not bothering to hide my disdain or annoyance. “You should’ve called.”

Their swagger as they take the half step toward me before meeting the resistance of my men causes me to want to rip off a limb, so I cross my arms and remind myself I’m trying to prevent an all-out war with the vampires; not give them a reason.

Riven’s smile is all teeth and amusement, the very picture of someone who enjoys stirring up shit just to see where it settles. “And miss this warm greeting? You can’t get this kind of leering with a phone call.”

“You can. It’s called FaceTime.”

“Ah,” they say. “Next time, then. Although I don’t believe that sort of scowl, radiating that type of rage, can be fully captured in 3D. The extra dimension gives so much more detail to the flare of your nostrils and threatening jut of your chin.”

I exhale, making a show of how exhausting I’m finding them already, and that if they take testing my patience too far, I’m likely to snap. “State your business, bloodsucker.”

“Ooh, reverting to name-calling.” Riven’s features smooth, that quirk of a smile showing off fuchsia lipstick and a hint of fang.

Enough that my guards grumble in warning, from those on all fours to those cracking knuckles and flanking either side of me.

Riven takes off their gloves, one finger at a time, revealing those fake fingernails nearly as long as their fingers—I have no idea how they expect to ever defend themselves with those things on. “You can tell the Snarl Squad to relax. No blood needs to be shed unnecessarily, at least not tonight.”

Oh, I’m about to find it extremely necessary.

And that’s even before they say, “I’m actually looking for an audience with your blushing bride.

” They neatly fold their gloves and take their sweet time tucking them into the pockets of their cape coat, as if we can’t rip their head from their body.

“I don’t mind going to her, but I’m fine waiting here if you’d rather bring her to me. ”

Yeah, I didn’t want their vampire stench anywhere near my home or my blushing bride.

Not that she was currently speaking to me.

We exchanged a handful of words over the past couple of days, and it was like pulling fucking teeth. I never knew “Please pass the milk” could sound so much like “I wish I could eat this cereal next to your corpse.”

The woman I sat next to at the bonfire, laughing and licking melted chocolate off our

lips and fingers, is gone.

The problem is, after that ax throwing contest, nobody can forget her display of magic or that she's a witch.

Which has also led to her wandering off in the forest to practice her magic—as well as getting in and out of the Hollow—alone. Since things were tense enough as it was, I gave her the semblance of space, having Elias and Gideon shadow her from several yards back.

In the meantime, I've been dealing with pack meetings from morning till night, until I've seen for myself why Conall was so damn grouchy all the time.

While there are good ideas and items we absolutely have to discuss and address in the mix, the majority of it is complaints and requests.

It makes me feel like some angry Santa Claus who goes around telling children there will be nothing but coal in their stockings this year.

This week, we discovered the hunters dedicated to finding us and torturing information and our powers out of us before slaughter are calling themselves the Arcane Tribunal and grow bigger each day.

All while the pack members are arguing who gets to be in charge during PTA meetings.

Conall reminded me that when there's a danger outside our walls, our members need normalcy more than ever inside of them.

More than anything, we needed to protect ourselves from those outside threats so that we could go on arguing about whether or not the kids needed to learn cursive.

I lift a finger to signal to Riven I'll be with them in a minute, then dial up Sasquatch and tell him to pick up Natalia from my place and escort her to the meeting chamber.

While I could tell it was a difficult shift for the mountainous ginger who looked like a time-traveling Viking to go from Conall and Kerrigan's personal bodyguards to taking orders from me, at this point, he's the only one I trust to handle Talia with a modicum of respect—even if she gets sassy.

Hoping my best welcome-wagon pair could work their own type of magic, I sent Kerrigan and Gina over yesterday afternoon while I was in meetings to check in on my wife. Not even they could get much out of her, and she was surlier than ever by the time I arrived home in the evening.

At this point, the only way the two of us would create a supernatural heir was in the lab.

Is that the kind of thing Kerrigan could do at the clinic?

It'd be a pity to skip the fun part, where I buried myself between Natalia's thighs and savored every little whimper and moan...

At the thundering of my heart, I have to press pause on the dirty thought reel. With a shift of my feet and a clearing of my throat, I calm my breathing and remind myself I'm standing in the middle of a forest.

Across from an overly smooth vampire.

"Come with me," I say after confirming Sasquatch is on his way to the meeting chamber with Natalia. He didn't bother commenting on how her mood was, but I'm sure as soon as she lays eyes on me, it'll be downright icy.

As I escort Riven inside the compound, a line of bodyguards at my side, I scrub a hand over my face. After a day of being the decider for so many things I didn't give a shit about, I was spent. I didn't want to have to determine one more thing.

But with so many lives hanging in the balance, what I wanted no longer mattered.

That was the other thing about becoming alpha—it never stopped. And with a dangerous faction of humans out there with the sole purpose of eradicating us from the earth, we needed every ally and extra minute we could get.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The council chamber is remarkably colder than the rest of the compound. Maybe it's the stone floors, the absence of windows, or the uncomfortable-looking wooden benches. The raised platform of werewolves up front, like the room itself, is built for judgment.

Sasquatch, the werewolf acting as my too-tall, hulking shadow, delivers me inside with a nod to my husband. The enormous guy knocked on my door hard enough that the window frames rattled, informed me he'd be escorting me to Diego as ordered, and that I could choose the easy way or the hard way.

As tempted as I was to tell him he could go fuck himself—and Diego, too—there was a whole phrase about working smarter not harder. Plus the guy didn't say a word, refusing to answer any of my questions or respond to any of my insults about werewolves.

“Go on up,” Sasquatch says, pointing his finger like I'll struggle to find my way. Diego's seated in that center seat on the raised platform like a king, his men at his side—and that very much included Nissa.

As I'd learned the night of the bonfire and ax throwing, the head of the Bridgewater Pack is all Diego De la Cruz will ever be, even to me. No going and thinking we had any form of friendship or intimacy.

No more cuddly chats by the fire or swooning that he cares if I've had a s'more before. I opened the shutters to my heart too wide that evening before the flickering

flames—wanting so badly to fit in, even in a pack of mangy wolves...

It stung every single time I recalled the entire audience shrinking away.

Evidently, they got to use their supernatural strength to show off and throw axes, but I received the message loud and clear that they didn't allow others to do the same.

Since that'd led me to declare my magic was the curse both of us always knew it was, I couldn't currently access it. Not that I'd told Diego or anyone else that my powers were giving the silent treatment to me.

So big surprise, training isn't going so great, and the instant I see Riven, a suffocating sense of failure settles over me.

I'm a champagne bottle someone's shaken within an inch of its life, corked too tight and ready to pop.

I'm not sure if it'll be anger or tears, only that it'll be wrong either way.

"I trust the night finds you well," they say, their eyes extracting all my secrets with the briefest of glances. Brightly painted lips purse, conveying they've noticed the night has not.

"Ah. I'd ask how we're progressing, but your expression confirms my pressing sense of urgency was not in vain."

Leave it to a vampire to speak with such outdated language—it takes me a few extra seconds to strip away the flowery language and figure out what in the Hecate they're trying to say.

I lift my chin as I bury the truth of this past week deeper within me. All I've managed

to do is sit in the forest, surrounded by golden threads I should be figuring out how to manipulate, fighting loneliness and self-pity.

Even now, my magic hums beneath my skin, restless and frustrated. Angry at not being used, yet utterly ineffective anytime I attempt to peel back the layers of this realm and return to the Hollow.

Something I'm painfully aware I could do when I had Diego as a grounding rod.

There was something about his infuriating, delicious distraction that countered the fear of peeking into the dark abyss.

Everyone who didn't have to travel there kept acting like it was no big deal.

As if I were Dora the Explorer, skipping off on an adventure with a map that led to my impending doom, and seriously, I'd kill for a klepto monkey right now.

"Well, since your pressing sense of urgency knows so much," I say, unable to keep the defensiveness from my voice, "you can go ahead and ask if it can do any better."

I swear the corner of Diego's mouth lifts the tiniest bit, then I have to remind myself I don't care about his smiles.

Same goes for his hulking muscles and how he stalks across our living room with booming steps, back and forth, back and forth—as if he's got a certain number of steps to hit on his watch and he refuses to meet his goal.

"That's what I was afraid of," Riven says, all contemplative, ignoring my barb completely. "The Arcane Tribunal that's been eradicating sections of werewolves and vampires along the east coast is starting their trek northwest. We've only met their welcome party, and our spies say..."

Riven's features sharpen, the line of her collarbone snapping tight.

“They have an entire army, trained in stealth tactics since the days of the Inquisition—since they dragged witches from their homes and burned them at the stake.

Anyone considered a monster was brutally murdered or driven into hiding.

“We're not only going to be outnumbered soon, we're going to be...

” They lick their lips, and their voice pitches ominously louder and higher.

“Outmatched. These hunters can't be glamoured—not without the loom.

They have a whole arsenal of weapons created with the sole purpose of killing you and me.

We've already lost hundreds—many of whom were hiding out in sparsely populated forests just like us.

And by us, I mean vampire and werewolf alike. ”

The room grows eerily quiet as what this information means sinks in.

“They'll keep the witches alive, though.

As long as you'll join their cause and do their bidding.

” Riven stretches an arm toward me, their fingertips barely grazing my cheek before Diego's suddenly there between us.

“They want you as badly as we need your help, they just don’t yet know you’re the key. ”

I crane my body, peeking around Diego’s massive torso to maintain eye-contact with Riven. I’d like to say my bullshit-o-meter is highly accurate, though we’ve all been fooled by a pro now and again.

In this moment, the only thing I see in Riven’s features and the ultra-blue of their irises is genuine fear. Fear from a vampire who appears completely unbothered by the four giant werewolves glaring with murderous intentions from inside enemy territory.

“It’s not fair, what we’re asking, or that the fate of several supernatural factions relies on you, Natalia Burroughs De la Costa from the Oldenwilde Coven.”

I swallow, for way more reasons than my name now being an overwhelming mouthful.

“But here we are, and we need you. Time to make a decision.” Riven’s voice lowers and glides over my skin, silky smooth, their gaze pinned to mine as if we’re the only two in the room.

“We don’t need someone to try, we need them to retrieve a weapon that’ll finally put an end to our slaughter. And regretfully, we’re out of time.”

My throat clamps from the pressure of the mission, along with a week of failures.

“I’m doing my best, but I don’t know what I’m doing.”

Dread rises up, replacing the air in my lungs until my head swims with the lack of oxygen. “I can’t ask my mother—she’s detrimental to my magic.”

Because harsh and unimpressed is all she’ll ever be when it comes to me.

“Well perhaps what I’m proposing doesn’t sound so bad in comparison, then,” Riven says, and uh-oh, they’re getting totally carried away with all that relief on their face.

I’m still broken.

I might be that way permanently.

“There’s a place where the veil is thin, where magic can be channeled and wielded with greater ease.”

Hope sends the beats of my heart racing, this idea that I could be useful calling to me. It’d be a bonus if it helped release some of this pent-up energy constantly buzzing beneath the surface.

“I can take you to it.” Riven reaches for me again, but Diego bristles and fully puts himself between us, cutting off eye-contact and everything.

He stretches every inch of his height to the limit. “Over my dead body.”

Riven shrugs a shoulder, their smirk infallible. “If those are your terms, I happily accept.”

I have to stifle my smile so nobody goes calling me a traitor, but I can’t help but envy and admire that type of badassery. Maybe they can teach that to me, too.

Diego sneers at the both of us, disgust dripping from his voice and his features. “You need me, and you know it.”

“She needs you.” Riven lifts their head, ever so regal, pale eyebrows arched up near their hairline. “Although I suppose, in turn, that means...”

As if it's impossible for them to actually say the words, they demurely fold their hands in front of them and skip right over the rest. "You're both welcome to join me. It's a bit of a journey, and we'll need to travel light."

They deliver it with flair, as if it's an invitation for a week-long getaway, not a magical excursion with hiking and camping, which I assume comes along. There aren't many wells of raw magic in areas where humans bulldoze and populate.

Sometimes I worried nature was a tap that'd run out, not sure if it'd be a dream or a nightmare for me to wake up in a world without magic.

Maybe it'd be easier, I thought, but the mere idea makes me feel cleaved in two.

Diego sweeps his gaze over his council members before returning it to Riven, and whoa, I almost forgot they were all here as well. "We'll discuss it," he says.

I have no idea if that "we" includes me, but since the mission does, he's going to quickly discover that it includes me now.

"I figured." Riven bobs their head in the tiniest show of respect. "I'll be waiting for your decision near the southern tree line where you found me. Within howling distance, should you need me."

They stride toward the exit like they'll be able to roam the compound unaccompanied, when I suspect they'll be immediately intercepted by the werewolf who looks like he fronts a Norse metal band.

They open the door and—sure enough—meet the firm resistance of Sasquatch.

Guy seriously has to stoop to shoot the vampire the stink-eye through the open frame.

“Sasquatch,” Diego says from directly behind me, “please escort Riven to the lobby and stay with them while we make our decision.”

Riven waves goodbye like they’ve just performed to a sold-out crowd.

Then they take it further by blowing me a kiss.

And I tell myself it doesn’t make me happy, the jealousy that snaps Diego’s shoulders so tight. I know it’s the bond, more obligation than affection. But there’s also a golden string that binds him to me, even if only a result of magic.

So, even as I throw up my walls in the name of self-preservation, part of me still aches to figure out how we could be a real team.

I can’t rid myself of the urge to find a way to become a real team—an unconventional one, sure, but something solid.

Because if we don’t, there may not be any supernatural creatures left.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

A witch, a vampire, and a werewolf walk into a forest...

As much as I wish that were a setup for a joke, my two-day camping trip with a pair of creatures with supernatural speed and strength has been all too real.

Not funny at all, really.

In fact, if I were rating the experience, I'd give it zero stars.

Thanks to a spell, we have to repower each morning with the sunrise, the vampire is traveling during the day, out in the sunshine for the first time in their undead life.

Riven glides over roots and underbrush with ease, practically floating up steep inclines, gracefully agile even when the gravel slips beneath our feet. Diego simply tramples it, sure-footed and heavy enough to create his own path.

Meanwhile, I trip over everything that can be tripped over, huffing like an asthmatic squirrel trying to keep up.

But on this second straight day of playing jungle crusader, my footsteps fail me, my jelly legs refusing to take one more step.

This is what I get for clinging to my pride when Diego offered to carry me, the noble brute.

Who was I kidding? I didn't have pride. All I had were sore muscles and blisters upon blisters—even with the fancy hiking boots the werewolves set me up with, gently used so they were already worn in.

“Okay, I'm calling it. We need to set up camp for the evening, or this is where you'll have to bury me.”

“Well, at least you've maintained your flair for the dramatic,” Riven says, giving me a sarcastic smile.

I flip them off. “How's this for flair?”

“Your delivery leaves a little to be desired. I could hardly hear the insult though all the wheezing.” Riven glances from me to Diego. “I'll gather firewood.”

With that, they're gone. I slide the straps from my shoulders and flop onto my backpack, using it for a seat.

The backpack Diego places down at my side is twice as big and at least three times as heavier, as he's carrying the tent, sleeping bags, and a pan for cooking—something I learned he brought only for me the first night when he said, “Riven and I don't mind a raw diet.”

So, he had moments of niceness.

Strangely enough, I think I'd prefer he be a straight-up asshole all the time. I was used to mean. It was when hope filtered in and whispered my life could be different that screwed with my emotions and my head.

Releasing a sigh, I slide from the top of my backpack to the ground, not bothering to move when the damp undergrowth seeps into the seat of my jeans. I feel the pulse of

lifeforce in the plants around and beneath me as they release their crisp, earthen scent into the air.

There's something different about the vegetation here.

Ancient and tangled, a lush carpet of plants that've become one after being left undisturbed for centuries.

Ferns unfurl around me like green lace on the forest floor, droplets of dew splatting my exposed arms. I inhale the damp soil, pine, and spot a patch of fungi that could help reduce stress and work as a tincture for dream enhancement.

They reach for me the same way I reach for them, sending puffs of vitality over me like pollen.

Diego rummages around in his pack, and then I hear the growing-familiar sounds of him pitching a tent.

And I mean that very literally, as there's been no other tent-pitching lately.

Because who he is at his core hates who I am at mine.

It's not bad enough I've loathed being a witch all my life—he's gotta hate me for it, too.

My vision blurs with the threat of tears, and that simply won't do. As my brusquely indifferent husband sets up our sleeping quarters, I sit up and examine the abundance of foliage I've planted myself in.

Tiny white flowers, like clumps of snow in the sea of green, call to me. Yarrow is great for stopping bleeding, as well as having anti-inflammatory properties. Combine

that with the pine resin and a little magic, and I'd have a soothing salve for my blisters.

My stomach growls, and I place my hand over it. Medical ointments first, actual cooking of food later.

Limping slightly but doing my best not to, so Diego doesn't give me that look—the one that says I should've let him carry me—I gather the ingredients.

Snippets of information from my classes about herbal remedies come back to me as I mix them.

Like how, in addition to creating a protective layer, pine resin also wards off spiritual intrusions, something that's definitely in play here.

Icy fingers walk down my spine, that itchy sensation on the back of my neck cranking up my uneasiness. I'm as safe as I can be with my two ridiculously strong and speedy protectors, yet I can't shake the sensation that there's something else watching me.

Waiting for me.

Waiting for me to screw up or just waiting, I'm not sure, but it's beginning to get to me.

I'm a damn good potion master, I think as my elixir comes together. Take that, mother.

I glance at Diego, grunting and forcing poles into holes with a precision that leaves me a little hot and bothered.

As exhausted as I am, I can't believe I'm getting turned on watching him be all manly

and creating us shelter, but I don't have enough energy to fight it, so I idly acknowledge there's a hedonistic yearning that comes along with the bond I can't fully shake.

Closing my eyes, I shut out my grumpy werewolf groom and everything else. Focusing on the salve I've created, I whisper the incantation into the bowl-shaped rock.

"Blend of root, of leaf, of tree... Protect and bind with this, my healing breath."

I gather up the magic inside of me, letting it well up before blowing air over the mixture, infusing it with the tingly plant-powered energy flowing freely inside me. It's a deeper magic that's been bottled up too long, hungry in a way I haven't experienced in years.

"Bring swift relief and set pain free," I finish, barely above a whisper.

It doesn't matter how quietly I speak, though. Diego can hear me breathing and my pulse and every twig snap and rustle of leaves. He knows I'm doing magic—we're here in this forest for the express purpose of me doing magic.

But now, as if it weren't enough to have my mother's critical voice running through my head, I see the expression on his face after the ax throwing contest.

This is why we're keeping our eyes squeezed so tight.

Not sure when I became a royal We, but I have too many other problems to address that particular one at the moment.

Unfortunately, I do need my sight for proper application, so I pivot around, facing the opposite of the tent and the man placing sleeping bags inside it. Nudging off my

shoes with my toes and then ridding my feet of my socks, I gather up my pain-relieving concoction and slather away.

“Ahhh.” It comes out unbidden, almost braggy. But my feet feel good for the first time in hours, so I stand by any sounds I make.

Diego’s head jerks up, my warning that Riven will come blasting into camp in three...

Two...

Logs clatter together as Riven drops them in a pile.

I appreciate how careful they are, minding the vegetation as they clear a space big enough for a small fire.

Day three of being on this journey means this is starting to feel normal, although normal typically means shitty for me.

All the silence between us means my brain is extra busy with everything we’re not saying. I don’t know what I’d do without Riven to break up the monotony. They’ve provided most of the commentary, as it feels like Diego and I are in the middle of a marital spat with no resolution.

Back at the compound, he’d instructed me to wait outside their werewolf chambers while they discussed what to do about my magic and whether I should even go on the journey with Riven.

“It’s pack business,” my irritatingly handsome husband said, attempting to usher me out of the room.

A few weeks ago, I probably would've accepted that. I would've just done as he wished and slunk off to await the big bad alpha's decisions.

But three nights ago, when I hadn't been hiking from morning to evening for days on end, I'd had enough of everyone ordering me around and telling me how my life was going to go.

I dug in my heels and spun around, finding my voice for long enough to let it really ring through the room. "This mission involves me, whether any of you like it or not. More than that, it centers around me and my ability to navigate the Hollow."

I'd held Diego's gaze for a beat, ignoring the gold in his eyes and setting my jaw. "As the mate of the alpha of the Bridgewater Pack, I also get a say. I'm staying."

The werewolf council all blinked at me like I'd declared myself the Queen of England, but nobody said another word about me leaving the meeting after that.

"We'd be fools to trust Riven," Nissa had said, hugging her pregnant belly protectively. "If this is a setup, we're not only putting the alpha's mate in danger, but the safety of the entire pack."

After everything else I've been called, I suppose Alpha's mate wasn't the worst—hell, I'd used it to get my way only moments before. But the coldness that rang through it, contrasted with Nissa's tangible fear for her loved ones, served as a slicing reminder that I was the outsider.

It gave me more in common with Riven than my husband, though I didn't entirely trust them, either. Vampires were manipulative as it is, but the badass clapping over their own fire-starting skills was cocksure and effortlessly charming.

Red flags for sure.

“What is it, little witch?” They dance a bit closer, swirling tendrils of campfire smoke and its oak and pine scent through the air. “You’ve obviously got a lot going on in that gorgeous brain of yours, and I’d really like to get inside it sometime.”

I shake my head, not rising to the bait. “Nothing I’d like to share with you, you silver-tongued flirt. You’re not invited in, so this is as close as you’re getting.”

Riven’s grin widens, their perpetually cheery mood never once hindered during two grueling days of hiking. They cross one leg over the other and float into a seated lotus position. “Do you sense how strong the magic is here? Feel it nipping at your skin?”

They shiver, and a full-body, can’t-repress-my-joy shudder goes through me as well.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” they say, and Diego storms through the middle of us.

“Do you ever get sick of the sound of your own voice? Goddamn.”

“No I don’t, but thank you for asking,” Riven responds cheerily, tempting their fate by batting their eyes. Their ultra-blue eyes flick to me. “Somebody’s surly after setting up camp. Care to go catch us dinner? I’ll keep your mate nice and warm.”

Diego whirls around and full-on roars, to the point I pop to my feet in case I need to play referee.

Riven remains unfazed. “This is what happens when you let all that sexual tension build up. The bond needs feeding, you know. As I’ve expressed before, I don’t sleep, but I’ll wander extra far tonight to give you newlyweds your space.

” They slowly unfold themselves, rising as easily as they sat. “I suggest you use it.”

Without waiting for our response, they blur into a rush of color and swish of

shrubby.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I'm a bumbling teenager on prom night, not sure when to whip it out.

Not it, it .

It doesn't help that my heightened senses mean I hear every rustle of Talia's sleeping bag and the steadily increasing chatter of her teeth.

I thought dinnertime had been cold—and that was with a crackling fire and warm stew in our bellies.

Talia ate her food with the type of grim countenance reserved for funeral processions, and without Riven to fill in the blank spaces and pretend we were three friends on a weekend getaway, there was a devastating finality to her silence.

Talia was done with me.

Which is why I'm hesitating to whip out the fact that I can easily get her to stop shivering if she'll allow me to lend her some of my body heat—just for survival reasons, like warding off hypothermia.

Although my mind's been plenty occupied with the kind of naked, sordid heat we could generate together...

Greatly complicated by her hatred of me, I wish that were enough to keep me from wanting Talia's body unceasingly. These past few days have been torture.

We'd only spoken a handful of words since the ax-throwing contest, and she'd used most of hers to undermine my authority in front of my men, insisting on being in on a meeting about pack business and playing the mate card.

So, while she was all huffed breaths, rolled eyes, and giving nonverbal answers with a nod or shake of her head, she wasn't the only one who was pissed off and regretting all their life choices.

Primarily the one where we got fucking married.

I never asked for her to be my mate. The obstinate, infuriating woman had insinuated her way into my life—into being my bride—and I resented the hell out of her for it.

She drove me crazy, to the point I could hardly focus on anything else as we tromped and climbed our way through untamed forest.

I hated the way she stormed ahead of me on our hikes like she had something to prove, too. Not only was she too slow and weak to be the leader, half the time she also started off in the wrong direction.

Did that prevent her from doing it again the next time we took off? Nope.

And when she fell behind and was obviously struggling, would she let me help by carrying her for a while? Also, no, while glaring at me like she'd shoot me full of silver bullets if she could.

Then there was the way she constantly stopped to readjust her bun. As if she couldn't do it while walking, because it took too much focus.

We'd all have to come to a complete and utter stop so Talia could stretch up her arms and arch her back, the fabric pulling taut across her breasts as she gathered all that

golden hair into a nest of messy curls.

And I'd be stuck sporting wood, adjusting my crotch and pretending I wasn't staring at the curve of her ass or the line of her neck. Definitely not noticing the way her shirt would ride up, revealing a tantalizing stripe of pale skin.

Inevitably, Riven would catch me looking and raise their damn, almost-invisible eyebrows like we were buddies in the locker room, nudging elbows over ogling my sexpot wife.

Jealousy churned through me like a washer that'd never finish cleaning.

She's mine .

I thought it every single time I caught Riven admiring Natalia, but it's not just the vampire spurring on my possessive streak.

I'm not even sure it's even the bond anymore, but I like the idea of that a lot better.

"This is ridiculous. I can't have you freezing to death on my watch," I mutter, finally breaking the silence. Well, save the swish of noisy fabric every time she shifts or shivers, which is every single second, and I need to get her warm now.

Like on a primordial level, I can't listen to her endanger herself any longer.

"And who s-says arranged m-marriages aren't romantic?"

I shoot her a look across the tiny distance, but it's dark enough I doubt she can see it clearly. "You can climb inside with me, where it's already warm, or I can come to you. Make a decision."

My pulse picks up speed at the rustle of nylon, and then Talia's dark outline scoots closer, until she's right next to me.

The unzipping sounds loud in the silence; my heartbeat is a war drum.

Talia slides into my sleeping bag beside me, her silky hair brushing my chest and arms. "You don't have a shirt on? What's wrong with y?—"

I wrap both of my arms around her and haul her against my chest, dogged in my attempt to stop the chattering of her teeth.

She melts against me. "By the goddess, you're so warm."

"I'm basically a space heater you've been ignoring for days."

She stiffens, and I regret my words, even if I meant them to be more of a light gibing. "That's because I'm mad at you," she says.

"Right back at you," I grouse.

She rolls to face me, the friction of her ass against my crotch causing my fingers to twitch with desire. Then her breasts are smooshed up against me, her kissable lips so fucking close. "Why are you mad? I'm the one who gets to be mad."

I loosely wrap my hands around her upper arms and begin rubbing heat into them. "You defied me in front of my men."

"You left me standing in the middle of a clearing all alone while everyone glared at me! For using magic." Her voice breaks, but the finger she jabs into my chest is unrelenting. "Something you're now upset at me for not being better at."

I open my mouth to reply, but I don't have a good response. Nothing besides a few grunted syllables that mean she has a point, even though I don't want her to. "I...I'm sorry. I shouldn't have left you standing alone like that."

"It's not just that. You pulled me in with your toasted marshmallows and including me, and I would've rather you just kept on being an asshole. Because for a glorious hour or so"—she sniffs, and it slays me—"that's what it felt like. Belonging."

A radiating ache flows outward, from my knotted heart to the tips of my fingers.

For so many years, Conall and I wandered, going from not quite teens to massive teenagers without a home.

We never felt particularly welcome until we carved out our own space in the Bridgewater Forest, but at least we always had each other.

I've only seen a sliver of the abuse Natalia suffered at the hands of her mother. I just don't know how to reconcile the fact that she's a witch, and witches murdered my entire family in front of me.

I hate her.

I admire her.

And without question, I want to fuck her.

It's all consuming with her body flush against mine, but I do my best to tamp it down while I handle her bruised feelings.

"You're right, that sucks. You've already been ripped from your home, and the first chance you had at kicking back and having fun with the wolves, we judged you.

You still can't question my orders in front of my men. ”

“Sounds like we'd better start having all our conversations away from them, then.”

I grit my teeth together, the muscles in my jaw so tight I'm not sure they'll unlock again. “I said you have a point. No need to push it.”

“Why? Because that's your job?” She shoves her hands into my chest, not with enough force to move me, though, because she still requires the warmth of my body.

Her skin is slowly regaining color and heat, so I mark it as a win, even if I'm now being warmed by my seething.

“I like you more than I want to,” I concede. “If that makes you feel any better.”

Her laugh is slightly choked. “That seems more like an insult, but your warmth is making me feel better.”

I curl her in closer and tuck my chin atop her head. “I'll take what I can get.”

“Yeah, I feel that.” She adjusts again, the confines of the sleeping bag leaving her leg searching for a place to land.

I find it a home over my thigh, all the friction and her soft curves, and my dirty mind means she's pressed up against my now-raging erection.

Since proper responses have left the building, I merely grunt.

Her sweet honeysuckle, meadowsweet scent invades my senses, my attempt not to lose my head and get entirely caught up in Natalia failing immediately.

It doesn't help matters that I've grown obsessed with the idea of taking her, imagining what it'd be like over and over again.

Watching her ass in those jeans through every mile and clearing and the hours without conversation—they've all been filled with the fantasy of Natalia, naked and writhing beneath me.

Now she's halfway there, each tiny shift and puff of breath turning me on that much more. "You keep rubbing up against it."

"We're sharing the same sleeping bag. It's kinda hard not to."

"I resent that kinda hard comment. We both know it's all the way there." I test the waters, equal parts curiosity and raging need, and arch against her.

My groan punctuates the quiet, followed by a moan from her that sends me soaring toward the moon—she's equally affected by me and the magnetic pull between us. She's just better at hiding it.

She cuddles closer, the resistance of her hip bone increasing the pressure against my steely length, and I'm beginning to think she's teasing and taunting me on purpose.

My control's about to snap either way.

That's the other reason I've done my best to convince myself I hate her.

She makes me feel unraveled. Unhinged. Too aware of every move she makes, the change in her breath when she's hiking and getting too fatigued, or almost asleep. How she'll bound off without checking if it's the right direction, and that fucking messy bun she redoes again and again.

“And the thing Riven said about the bond...” Talia rubs her thighs together. “I hate that they might have a point.”

Once again, I grunt.

Not my best, but my hips rock of their own accord, the rush of pleasure through my core leaving my eyes rolling back into my head.

“Is this what it feels like to be a guy?” she asks with a dizzying buck of her hips, mouth falling open in a perfect O shape. “All I can think about is sex and doing it, and I’m dizzy with the idea of it all fucking day.”

“Yes,” I say simply. “But I’ve never experienced it on this level. I’ve seen my brothers lose their minds over their mates, I just never thought I’d be one of them.”

I take the opening, my mouth finding the curve of her shoulder. It’s the same spot I lavished attention on while she projected into the Hollow, and it’s as delicious as I remember, her pulse setting itself to the swipes of my tongue.

My hand finds the hem of her shirt and slides beneath. Her skin has lost some of its coolness, but she’s still not warm enough.

Not that my motive is purely altruistic—still, science is science. “Let’s get this shirt off you. We’ve gotta maximize surface area.”

“I’ll maximize your surface area,” she says, the comeback making me chuckle.

“Sweetheart, you can maximize my surface area anytime.” I peel her shirt up and off her before covering her body with mine again.

At her happy sigh, my heart expands in my chest, and didn’t I tell myself this was just

sexual? Slaking the lust to feed the bond, that was all.

Talia wraps her arms around me extra tightly, her eyes finding mine and glinting in the dark. Desire swims in the green depths, the light from the moon sending a silvery stripe across the bridge of her nose.

Ever so slowly, she rolls her hips, dragging my cock over the apex of her thighs.

Her moan fills the air, better than any of my fantasies, and I've had my fair share in the two weeks since the wedding.

The keening sound that fills the tent and having her shirtless and writhing beneath me, though, is one hundred percent real.

As real as the woman shoving her pants down her thighs.

I snag hold of the waistband for her and tug—a real helper like that—and in the second it takes, I resent the space it forged between us.

Then I'm grateful and onboard again, as those silky-smooth legs tangle with mine. She wraps herself around my torso like a koala bear. "This is purely scientific, obviously."

"By all means..." Reaching between us, I flatten my palm and point my fingertips toward the waistband of her panties—simple and pink, with lace around the waistband and a tiny bow that makes me feel like unwrapping my present. "In fact, I have a few theories I'd like to test for myself."

My head swims when I reach the lace of the elastic, and my fingers brush that damn bow. "Mostly involving the pleasure principle."

“Ah yes, a subject I’ve been more curious about as of late.” She arches her back, putting more of her on more of me, and the pressure has black spots dancing across my vision. “Need a study buddy?”

Gliding my hand into her panties, I palm her, a low noise of satisfaction rumbling through me at her damp heat. “More like a test subject, and lucky me, you’re already soaked.”

“That’s your fault. All that brooding and stomping through the woods and setting up camp. You providing warmth and shelter makes me want to be the Jane to your Tarzan, even though I’m a strong independent woman.”

“Don’t worry, I promise not to be gentle.” I crash my mouth over hers as I delve my fingers into her slick, ready entrance, devouring her gasp and teaching her tongue a new rhythm—mine.

And she is mine. Even if she hates it.

Even if I do, too.

Matching each swipe of my tongue with the strokes of my fingers, I spread her wetness over her, the world going hazy as her every twitch and whimper encourages me on.

Even when I close my eyes lately, she’s all I see. The bounce of her curls and the curve of her neck. I hear the skidding of her pulse and inhale her scent, and I can’t get enough of her taste.

At the glimmer of hesitation on her end, I gather all my self-restraint and pause in place, my entire body protesting the idea of stopping when the bond demands being fed.

“I still want to throat-punch you,” she says, and I chuckle.

“You’re free to try.” I brush my mouth over hers in a punishing kiss. “But I don’t show my throat to anyone.”

She whips up a hand, but I’m faster. I manacle her wrist in my fingers and pin her arm over her head. Then I make a long appraisal of her body, not bothering to hold back my blatant appreciation.

I grow harder as she writhes beneath me.

“So what?” she asks in a raspy voice that I feel down to my balls. “Tonight we share body heat and screw each other’s brains out, and in the morning we go back to being enemies?”

“Probably,” I say, my voice gruff with desire. I wedge myself tighter between her thighs, resuming my ministrations with my fingers as I part her lips with my tongue. “But tonight, we just get to let it happen.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Ragged breaths fill the tent, the snapping, crackling desire hotter than any campfire.

Diego's mouth is on mine, coaxing me to open further to him, body and soul.

Each languid stroke of his fingers and tongue is undoing me in the most exquisite of ways, and I long for him to destroy me again and again. He's cocky and immovable and occasionally a gentleman, and I don't know how to deal with him any other way than giving in.

Especially since it feels so damn good to let go.

"Diego," I breathe, arching into his touch, wrapping my fingers around his muscular shoulders and digging my nails lightly into his skin.

"Don't worry, bruja ." He swipes his tongue along my upper lip before capturing my lower one between his teeth and giving it a teasing nip. "I'll let you come, but I'm not nearly finished with you yet."

My magic gathers within me and zings, screaming and begging for more.

I've never had it intertwined with sex like this, the few times I indulged with human boys were few and far between.

Nothing even close to this, or I'd have become a sex fiend.

This is like oxygen after years underwater, fire that doesn't get put out with rain.

I cry out as he plunges a finger inside me, his thumb finding my clit and circling it with a singular focus—pleasure.

“Have I warmed you up yet?” His arrogant question dissolves on my lips. “You’re absolutely soaked.”

“Please Diego, I need it more than I need my next breath,” I say, glancing up at him with a level of supplication I’ve never reached with anyone else, far too horny to be embarrassed.

Maybe if I can rid myself of this constant, needy ache between my legs, I can concentrate on something besides how Diego looks and how he walks, talks, and does every-fucking-thing, and how much he drives me crazy.

Diego pulls back, and I knew it—I should’ve let him in on how badly I need a release. People always use my desires and emotions against me.

But then I watch, transfixed, as he pops the fingers he had inside me in his mouth and sucks them clean.

My sex pulses in response, jealous and totally enrapt.

His hum fills the air. “Goddamn, woman. You’re all fire and sweetness.”

Lifting myself onto my elbows, thoughts of the chilly temperature long gone, I lock eyes with him and say, “Why don’t you take me already and see?”

The corner of his mouth lifts, a crooked, smug smile slowly taking shape. “Is someone in a hurry?”

An exasperated noise escapes as I rub my thighs together and tug on his arm. “Yes, me. I’ve made that abundantly clear. I can’t take it any longer.”

At long last he climbs over me, the extraordinary weight of him pinning me to the ground.

“Let’s just consummate the bond already,” I say, wrapping my legs around his waist so he can’t get away again.

Diego swipes a few frizzy curls from my face and captures my chin in his hand. His thumb swipes across my lower lip and the walls of my pussy clamp and grow irritated at not having his cock buried deep inside already. “And who says arranged marriages aren’t romantic?”

He’s so pleased with himself, tossing my words back at me, that I decide to show him I’m not the only one hot and bothered.

I move my lips to his ear, darting my tongue out to lick the lobe before sucking on the skin right beneath. A slight shift of my hips brings the head of his cock up against my entrance, and then the arms he’s braced himself on shudder and threaten to give out.

“Fine, you just stay right there. I’ll do all the work.” I rock my hips up, and he slides inside me with a guttural groan.

“Not on my watch.” Diego withdraws his delicious length, one of his large hands pinning my hips to the ground so I can’t lift my hips and capture his cock again.

I’m about to protest and prostrate myself, but then he thrusts inside me, fast and hard, so deep we become one.

I stretch to accommodate his size, a slight whimper falling from my lips.

“You okay?” Diego asks, checking on me with a tenderness in his espresso-colored eyes I didn’t expect.

“Gods yes,” I rasp, arching against him. My magic scores burning lines through my limbs, flowing like molten lava beneath the skin. Every cell in my body glimmers and pops, a firecracker that’s just been lit and about to go off.

Then we’re moving together as if our bodies have been set to this rhythm for centuries.

It’s a desperate type of worship, like our lives are on the line and all we can do is pray.

After days and days of this fevered hunger brewing between us, it’s become a living, breathing thing, and it’s a fucking relief to finally be scratching that hedonistic itch that won’t go away.

“Right— uhnnn . There.” I grip a fistful of his hair, yanking his mouth to mine for a heated kiss, where we say everything we need to with our tongues.

We’re fire and friction and skin beaded with sweat.

Every touch, every kiss, every thrust takes me to another pleasure-filled plane, until I’m sure our bodies were made with the sole purpose of worshipping each other.

Diego hooks his hand in the crook of my knee and brings my leg up over his hip, hitting a delicious spot deep inside me not even I knew existed. Now it’s my new obsession, along with the pressure of his cock and how he rocks against me.

One blissful sensation after the next shivers through me—the scrape of his stubble, the hand kneading my breast and tweaking my nipple.

I was freezing and now I'm scorching hot, the incendiary flames so glorious I've decided to let them take me.

Grabbing at his back and digging my nails into his shoulders to anchor myself as the inferno spreads, I take control of the kiss. It's my turn to do a little plundering and conquering.

My breaths come right on top of each other, as rapid as the thundering of my heart. His pubic bone comes to glorious rest against my clit, rubbing and adding an intoxicating pressure with each roll of my hips.

"I'm so close," I whisper, afraid I'll reach the summit but miss the exhilarating free-fall that comes after.

Every muscle in his body goes taut, and he groans like it's physically paining him to hold back. "Tell me what you need, and I'll give it."

I've brought this giant beast to his knees, and I'm too greedy to release him ever again, not with the bond giving whole new meaning to mutual satisfaction.

Every move feels like discovering electricity, shedding light on previously undiscovered realms of pleasure I want to visit again and again. His desire fuels mine, which fuels his, which fuels mine.

"Touch me," I whisper. "Like you did earlier."

He reaches between us and finds my clit, and then my vision and hearing come in snippets of his pecs and bulging biceps and grunts and groans.

"That's it," he says, his praise sending me soaring higher. "You're fucking gorgeous, all naked and needy for me."

He shifts back on his heels the tiniest bit, changing up the angle of his thrusts while increasing the pressure of his circling fingers.

“You ready, baby?” he asks, and I nod, despite not being totally sure what he’s asking.

My eyelashes flutter closed as that euphoric pressure builds to a head...

And bursts.

My muscles lock around him, increasing the deluge of pleasure. I cry out as my orgasm dashes through my entire body, clinging to Diego as the tidal wave pulls me under and he buries his face in my neck.

I feel his hot, panted breaths against my damp skin, and then he pistons his hips faster, driving into me one last time, all the way to the hilt.

With a growl, he empties himself into me, his hips bucking with the aftershocks.

I’m a warm, melted pile of skin and bones, in a sleeping bag with a hulking werewolf who curls me to his big body.

We lie like that for several minutes, the bond thrumming between us like a heartbeat.

But there beneath the magic and contentedness, a string in my chest tugs, attempting to attach itself to a guy more dangerous than any vampire army—at least to me, anyway.

In record time, Diego De la Cruz has torn through every defense I’ve ever built.

I’m afraid I’ve landed in werewolf quicksand, and it’s only a matter of time before

I'm in over my head.

CHAPTER TWENTY

As we pack up camp, there's a chill in the morning air, but all I have to do to warm up is look over at Diego.

Then I'm reliving how he moved against me, inside me. His warmth, his weight, our pleasure echoing through both of us, amplified by the bond.

I thought it was powerful before, but it's grown new roots overnight. Deep, insistent roots that've entwined my organs and attuned all my senses to him.

It's incredible, and at the same time, it terrifies me.

He's rolled up our sleeping bags and tent and is shoving everything in that humongous backpack he carries with ease. I gave it a tug on my way to extinguish the fire we made for this morning's breakfast, and I couldn't even get it to budge.

Much like the dew that feeds the pulsating plants around us, I'm refreshed and perkier than I've been in years.

I have a renewed sense of purpose that I'm afraid will only be ripped away, leaving me wondering once again if it's better to build walls or enjoy it while it lasts.

After wiping down the mugs we used for our coffee, I roll them in the cloth and hand them to Diego so he can pile them in his backpack with most everything else.

"Thank you," he says, letting his fingers drag over mine as he takes it.

Our conversations since unzipping the tent and stepping into the chilly air to prepare for our final day of hiking have been short and concise. Simple, common phrases, like we're both afraid to say more and break the spell.

Like we didn't spend the night intimately getting to know each other's bodies.

We didn't just release all our built-up sexual tension; we obliterated it. Even with our backs turned, I feel him, that string of magic that connects us constantly pulsing, undeniably stronger than before.

Suddenly his head jerks up, his entire body on alert.

Panic shoots through me, raising my blood pressure along with it. Then it hits me, it's probably just?—

“Well, well, well.” Our vampire companion materializes at my side, and then Diego is there between us, throwing an arm out as if I need protecting.

Naturally, it only amuses Riven, who waggles their pale eyebrows.

“Happy to have accommodated a romantic evening under the stars. Even happier you two took advantage of it.”

“Thanks for making it as awkward as possible,” I mutter with a shake of my head, and Riven's musical laughter rings out.

“Awkward was what you two were doing before—dancing around, wasting all that pent-up energy on the wrong things, fighting when you needed to be fucking.”

“You can stop anytime, you know,” Diego says. “Besides, if anyone's going full bloodhound, it should be me.”

“Too true. On both counts.” Riven skips over to my tiny backpack and slings it over their shoulder. “Another hour of hiking and we’ll reach the summit. Now that you’ve stopped fighting the mate bond, we can actually use it.”

Over the next two hours, we hiked in mostly silence.

At hour one, when I complained like a little kid about not being there yet, Riven replied they’d forgotten to account for my slow, human pace. Then I had to be offended over being called slow and human, when again, a normal human, no magic or powers, is all I ever wanted to be.

As the trail we’re blazing narrows and inclines, Diego tosses his pack at Riven and demands to piggyback me the rest of the way.

I’m too tired—and too slow, evidently—to protest.

When Riven grouses over the weight of the pack as we get going again, they and Diego get into a spat over who’s the strongest, and in the next instant, I’m not just being carried to the summit, I’m riding sidecar in a supernatural race I never agreed to be part of.

It does the job, though, and we reach the summit within twenty minutes.

While the air is noticeably chillier at this elevation, dropping down to temperatures we’ve only experienced at night, I immediately feel why Riven brought us here.

Magic wells up from the rocks and sings through the trees, the threads I typically see more like a golden rope.

Everywhere I look, there are threads upon threads, twisting up through every blade of grass and buzzing bee.

It's like tapping directly from the source, and it chases my goosebumps and any thoughts of cold far, far away.

Now I'm humming with both the power and the mate bond, to the point I think someone could charge their phone if they just plugged it into me.

My inner magic surges, ready and waiting. But at the mere thought of ripping apart the threads of our universe to get to the dreary realm between, it screams out a warning.

This is how it starts, something inside me whispers. This is how you become her.

Andromeda used magic like a weapon set to destruction. For most of my life, she's been set on eradicating every supernatural faction outside of covens: no chances, no mercy, just devastating precision.

I could still hear the screams.

They'd echo through the trees as I stood stunned and helpless at my mother's side, watching as she gathered another fireball in her hands and set another home ablaze without pause.

If that was the definition of strength, I'd choose weakness every day.

I don't want to be a woman who trades kindness and genuine relationships for command and control, until she becomes something sharp and soulless herself.

Until nothing's left.

Some doors aren't meant to be opened.

Go too deep, and you might lose yourself as well.

“Ready when you are,” Riven says, but it sounds more like hurry it up, we have a job to do.

They’re right, so I nod to Diego, who sets himself behind me, arms loosely wound around my middle.

I flatten my hands, spreading them apart like I’m opening a double barn door, and release the power I gathered in my limbs from the supercharged ground.

The fissure in front of me seals itself off before it even fully forms, and it must be because I’ve tuned into every living and breathing thing that I feel Riven’s disappointment so sharply.

Wait. They’re neither living nor breathing, so how can that be?

My connection to the Hollow flickers out, a phone call with a weak signal that’s abruptly dropped. It’s exactly what’s happened before.

I plant my feet firmer and try again, only to get the same sputtering response.

A mere peek inside, and then it’s sealed off to me.

Ever since my first trip venturing into the Hollow, when I felt that disturbing level of despair, I’m scared of what’ll greet me—scared of getting stuck inside forever—which is probably why I haven’t had much success.

“I’m sorry, I can’t,” I say, even if it’s not the whole truth.

“Listen, we came all this way, taking three days for a journey that would’ve taken me

one,” Riven snaps, their annoyance coming through loud and clear. “It’s time for you to do what you promised, or we’ll do what we promised and give you a war.”

I open my mouth to apologize for my weakness, but Diego is faster. “Do you think this is helping, bloodsucker? Take a walk.”

“But if?—”

“It wasn’t a question.” Diego’s muscles ripple beneath the surface, coiling up as if ready to strike, sharp canine teeth filling his elongated snout.

He’s transformed into a lethal amalgamation of man and beast, and despite the haughty lift of their chin, a hint of fear flickers through Riven’s expression.

What’s weird is I don’t even feel a blip, and my husband legit looks like a creature from nightmares.

If anything, I’m pissed—and a little hurt—at Riven. I thought we were kind of friends, or at least on the same team. They just showed me I’m a means to an end, nothing more, and I wish it didn’t sting.

“I will still be within earshot this time, wolf,” Riven says, outwardly unruffled, but there’s a tick at the corner of their eye that suggests they’re already beginning to scheme ways around it. “As soon as she goes in—and she’d better go in—I’ll be back.”

“As soon as you leave, we’ll see about getting her inside.” Diego’s voice is gravelly, spoken through teeth that make it sound as though he’s gargling rocks. “But threaten my bride again, and you’ll have your war right here and now.”

They give Diego a long-suffering eyeroll and arch a threatening brow in my direction.

Then they're gone, my eyes unable to track their movements.

I wait a handful of seconds more, ensuring they're really gone before turning in Diego's arms to face him.

I expect irritation and anger.

Instead, he cups my cheek, his features morphing back to his human form.

I quite like this form, even if a little conflicted about letting him all the way in.

"Hey, it's not a race," he says. "We spent days getting here, and you're tired and dealing with a lot. Let's get you centered and in control of your magic before you try again."

For Hecate's sake, if he goes and shows me patience, I'll fall in love with him for real.

I nod, because I don't know what else to do.

Firm hands grip the sides of my waist and spin me to face the sweeping forest below, stretching as far as I could see. Diego brings my back flush against his chest. A couple of stray hairs catch his whiskers as he looks at the view along with me, cheek-to-cheek. "It's beautiful."

"I always thought people were being dramatic or hyperbolic when they called something breathtaking, but damn." My breath puffs out over the ravine, far freer than me.

"Will it help if I go all cheesy and say you're the one taking my breath away?" he asks in a low voice next to my ear.

“Somehow, I doubt it.”

“Then I’ll keep it inside, but just know I mean it.” He brushes a kiss on my temple as he curls me tighter in his arms. “You’re gorgeous. All morning, I can’t stop staring at you.”

I smile, despite myself.

Despite the two of us and our bonkers situation. “There’s nobody I’d rather be here with, ears and tails and all.”

“There she is,” Diego whispers, with enough praise in his voice that my nipples tighten. “Where’s the girl who made an ax weave around trees?”

“Probably crying because she got ostracized after that,” I say, my mood dipping along with my inner magic.

“Okay, that’s fair, and totally on me.” Using his grip on me, I’m spun to face him once again, and if I’d known that was his intention, I might’ve dragged my feet more.

It’s too hard to think logically while looking at him and feeling all these tiny threads from my heart stitching their way to his.

“But we both know there’s more going on here,” Diego finishes, and damn him for being all insightful and probing and sexy. I honestly can’t decide whether to strangle him or kiss him.

“I’m sure a therapist would tell me I’m holding back because of my issues with my mother,” I quickly blurt, the vulnerable spot in my chest folding in on itself, and we can’t have that, so I rush to make a joke.

“Although witches aren’t big on therapy.

We’d rather make a potion with eye of newt and tooth of a wolf—which is where you come in. ”

Diego’s the picture of unamused, with a side of go ahead and try. “No chance in hell you’ll get one of my teeth.”

“Oh come on, you have plenty! You were just showing them off to Riven.”

“Careful, or I’ll embed one in your ass.” He hauls me closer to him, making a blatant display of checking out my backside. “Yeah, I’ll definitely be biting that later.”

I laugh, some of the heaviness in my chest easing. He has this way of doing that, yet I don’t trust how long it’ll last. Only that when it comes to sex, lasting isn’t a problem for him.

Diego gasps, going all over the top with it. “You want me to, dirty girl.”

I swat him with the back of my hand. “Careful, or I’ll turn you into a toad and leave you out here.”

“That’d be a shame, mostly for you.” He trails kisses up the line of my neck, dips his tongue in my ear, and licks the shell, causing me to melt against him.

“You only got a preview of what it can do, too. Be a good girl and go navigate the Hollow. I promise to reel you back in and give you a private showing later tonight.”

“Unfair,” is all I manage, and it’s more of a hum as he drags fingertips up and down my arms.

Everything is tingly and light, and I want his tongue and his praise and his body, so I mentally fortify myself the best I can—I've got work to do.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

It's ridiculous how well Diego's combination of teasing and motivating works.

With his mouth at my ear, the promise of delivered pleasure still ringing in it, I'm a puppet, eager and willing to let him pull my strings.

I should probably be annoyed at how easily he can disarm me, but his tricks are easing my anxiety enough to allow my magic to crackle and buzz, so I lean into it.

Into him.

I know he'll catch me if I fall, and that's boosting my abilities, too, although I'm not sure turned-on is the best way to go charging into the nether.

I've got this. Find the Blood Loom. In and out, simple as that.

Even with the help of the man slipping a hand beneath the fabric of my shirt, I know it won't be simple or easy.

But with his hand so callused and warm against my skin, my certainty in him as my anchor catapults my belief in myself and how far I can roam. I can feel each of the glowing threads of the universe, from the plants in various shades of green to the glowing life force of several critters.

Birds, insects, rodents—a handsy werewolf.

His lips skim my neck as he palms one of my breasts.

“Okay,” I say breathily, “now that’s getting a little distracting.”

Diego groans against my skin, the vibrations of his deep voice rumbling through me. “You never know where the line is unless you go looking.”

“Well, you’ve found it, Lewis and Clark.” I tilt my head to give him better access to my neck, not helping myself one bit. “Notice I listed them both, as you’ve got the groping skills of at least two men.”

His huffed laughter hits the skin he’d recently be lavishing open-mouth kisses on, and I’m about to spin around and initiate round two, and that simply won’t do.

For reasons I’m struggling to recall right now.

“Get to it, then, bruja ,” he says as he gives my ass a pat, going from naughty to a teammate on a football field in a flash.

Just kidding, he’s filling his hands with my ass cheek and squeezing, so I take that back. And while I shouldn’t like him calling me a witch in Spanish so much, it causes a full body shiver every time.

“That’s my promise that we’re not nearly done,” he whispers in my ear with a low growl, “Till we meet again, Talia’s ass.”

While my corporeal ass will remain on this plane with him, I don’t bother mentioning it. And not just because I want to be fully present when he makes good on his promise.

Diego’s doing his job of distracting me from the level of magic I’m about to use; it’s

my turn to stop hiding from what I am and give it a spin.

I widen my stance, planting my feet firmly on the lush carpet of vegetation.

My breaths slow, then deepen.

The wind rustling the leaves in the trees quiets; the birdsong overhead fades.

It's as if every living thing senses I'm about to open a portal to somewhere nobody would want to go.

It's also time to stop stalling, so I go ahead and give the threads a tug.

As they part, I stop being gentle and yank.

Like a sweater undone with the tug of the right strands of yarn, the air parts and peels away, revealing a soulless void I greet not with hesitation—but with the attitude of let's go ahead and play.

The Hollow beckons me in like it's been waiting for me, and I let myself fall into it.

All the sights and sounds of the physical world get distorted as I'm sucked sideways through the veil.

The forest blurs, my ribs stretch apart like something inside me is expanding...

Then I'm standing on the dismal gray ground of the Hollow, slightly floaty from the shift in gravity.

Rather than fade away, the gold and iridescent threads I've used to open the rift weave a path beneath my feet, guiding my steps. They're the only thing in the

universe I've ever trusted, so I put my full trust in them now.

My steps are bouncy, like I'm on the moon. For a second I wonder wouldn't that be weird if this realm was really just the moon the whole time?

I swear the darkness answers me back, angered at being compared to a hunk of rock in the sky. I'd apologize, but I have no idea who to address.

At my back I feel a tug, the tether Diego's providing, the mate bond pulsing strong.

It makes it easier to keep walking in this place where time doesn't move—it bleeds. My thoughts feel far away; my emotions thin out until they're intangible threads in danger of fraying away completely.

Everything I felt so strongly this morning—affection, warmth, connection—drains like color from a washed-out memory.

Through the thick yet gravity-less air, I try to hold on. To Diego's kiss, the strength in the arms that held me all night, the way he made me feel worshipped and wanted in ways nobody has ever done before.

I grit my teeth and push forward, wanting to find the Blood Loom and get out of here, never to return. The only positive in a sea of soul-sucking agony is the abundance of magic up here on the summit that sharpens my senses and allows me to feel every living thing.

Nothing inside the Hollow's alive in the same way it is on our side, though.

Every root feels sick, as if the gnarled trees are only for show, not capable of growth.

I'm not sure why I squint, but it seems to work anyway. There in the distance, I feel

the powerful thrum of a different lifeforce—a magical one, ancient and primordial.

Sentient and discerning and...almost human?

I glide toward the vital spark, navigating the tangled web of gray, sticky threads and hellish rock and gravel terrain. My body is weightless, but my soul is being pulled, drawn toward that flicker of life, while the tether at my back feels weaker and farther away.

It doesn't make sense that a weapon or even a magical tool would have that kind of signature, but I know in my bones I'm going the right way.

Through a tangled thicket of bushes without leaves or berries but plenty of thorns to snag on my clothes and rip at my skin, I stumble into a clearing.

The air is denser, colder. Utterly devoid of joy or life or anything. It's so close to the meadows back in pack territory—for instance, the one where they throw axes.

In fact, it's eerily similar in a way that makes me question what I'm seeing and feeling; if there truly is anything that could live in this place.

A laugh echoes around me, and I spin in a circle. Figures take cloudy shape, faces obscured, and then I'm reliving one of my nightmares as the werewolves I was just beginning to know all go from laughing to gasping and backing away.

You don't belong with those mutts, anyway, precious threadling, an ancient voice purrs, feminine with all harsh edges. You have the power of your witch ancestors in your veins, but you're too afraid to use it.

Joke's on her. I don't even know how to use it.

You tug at the seams of the universe and bring your enemies to their knees, the voice answers my unspoken question, velvety smooth but dripping with venom.

Smoke obscures my vision, my lungs straining with the black, belching clouds.

It's only by letting go that you can truly be free.

I cough and wave at the smoke, my eyes stinging as the belching black cloud envelops me.

I glance back the way I came, but the hazy black exhaust is all I can see.

No tether, no Diego, no crack of sunlight to guide me toward fresh air and into the strong arms of a werewolf.

My werewolf.

That's more than the bond talking, I'm almost sure.

They have the wool pulled over your eyes, Realmweaver. You're so much more than a mate, more than a witch. You'll always be too much for them, but you could be exactly what we need.

Let us teach you. The words caress my skin, cool against the blazing heat of the smoke, though I still can't see the flames.

All at once, the smoke parts, and I see her.

I expect Andromeda, but it's not my mother.

It's me.

Standing on a ridge above the werewolf compound of the Bridgewater Pack, flames turning the sky orange. My hair blows wild around my shoulders, my eyes glow bright, and my mouth is curled in giddy joy over all the destruction I've caused. The wolves below scatter, women and children in the mix.

Buildings burn.

Either join us out there or join us in here forever.

And that's when I see it—glinting in the reflection of the firelight, clutched in my other self's hand. Bones hobbled together in a loom, the threads between made of ichor and blood that shimmers red in what seems like moonlight despite the lack of a moon.

The Blood Loom.

Powerful enough to return vampires their magic, something witches have hoarded for centuries, without question. I'm not sure I'm ready to hand over that type of power to the vampires, but I'm also not sure I have a choice.

"I need that loom," I say, my voice hoarse from the smoke.

All at once I'm standing in front of myself, my heart pounding like it means to beat its way out of my chest.

I imagine my shadow-self handing me the bone rods that create the bars of the loom, and she slowly extends them toward me, this bloodthirsty warrior woman I could never be.

The second she-me places the gore-slicked tool in my hands, every instinct inside me screams.

Run.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

She's been gone too long.

Except I don't know how it feels to Talia with the Hollow messing with time and space in that way it does.

Anyway, I'm assuming. Now that she's in there, lost to me in this realm, I'm kicking myself for not asking more questions. As her tether, I should really know when to pull her out.

We should've come up with a backup plan, because the amount of panic rising up and replacing the air in my lungs is getting more worrisome by the second.

I glance up at the sun to gauge the time.

Through the canopy of leaves, I catch glimpses of blue, dotted with heavy, gray-bottomed clouds.

The sun's still on the rise in the east, only without having paid enough attention to where the giant glowing orb was in the sky when she went in, I'm still thumbs up my ass.

So while I don't know exactly how long she's been in an outwardly catatonic state, I'd guesstimate it to be about twenty, thirty minutes.

Compared to the last time I was with her when she navigated the shadow realm, it

seems like an eternity.

But I suppose it's not that long to search for something like your car keys, much less a powerful weapon that could turn the tide of a supernatural war.

All I know is every muscle in Talia's body has gone taut, the REM behind her eyelids accelerating along with the speed of her panted breaths.

Sweat beads her skin and dampens the hair at her forehead, and her features—formerly smooth and serene, as if off in a dream—are distressed and strained with fear.

Maybe she just can't find it.

Around us, the forest has gone still, the scent of pine and wet moss coating the sinister silence. Even the noisy birds have stopped their chirping, the leaves no longer rustling, as if even the wind knows something's wrong.

Or maybe it's always this still and serene, I don't fucking know. It's not like there are many people who wander this far from civilization. The thin veil and all the magic might be messing with the vibes, too—I've never trusted any of that stuff.

All I can trust is my gut and this connection that buzzes through my skin, demanding I do something, and now. Even if I don't know what that something is.

Keeping my hand anchored to her stomach, I study her face again with unblinking intensity, as if she'll somehow be able to tell me even though she's on another plane entirely.

“Natalia honey, I'm getting worried. I don't want to cut your time short, but I refuse to lose you to that place.” As soon as the words are out of my mouth, I experience the

gut-punch of how true they are.

It's not just losing her to the Hollow that concerns me, either.

She's burrowing beneath my skin a little deeper each passing day, my affection growing at an equally accelerated rate.

If I let myself, I could lose myself in this woman, and that scares me as much as letting down my people. When it comes to top ranks, those men and women are soldiers and have always had to be.

The rest of our community lives the simple life, with relatively little to fear, and Conall, Nissa, and I planned it that way. Our pack isn't ready for war, not by a long shot, and the loss of a single member would be absolutely gut-wrenching.

Not on my watch.

There—her fingers twitched, the tiniest bit.

For such a small movement, it's wild how strongly the connection buzzes through me, insisting once again I take action.

Her pulse goes erratic, and her shallow breaths come right on top of one another, her chest heaving with the movements.

Wrongness prickles my skin and settles in my gut, a heavy rock I can't ignore anymore. "Fuck it," I mutter, increasing my grip on Natalia with a renewed sense of purpose, "I'm pulling you out."

"Don't you dare, fleabag."

Riven's voice drifts over me, containing that mixture of smarminess and condescension that makes me want to unleash my claws on them.

They're suddenly at my side like a damn specter, lookin' for a brawl, apparently. I should've caught their scent and presence earlier, but I was too focused on Talia, and I stand by that.

Even if I can't let it happen again.

"I don't answer to you, Count Suckula," I fire back. "And if I feel like she needs me, I'll pull her out so fast your head will spin." I bare my teeth, my voice dropping to a low growl. "I'll rip it right from your body and leave it spinning like a top."

Riven hisses, their freakishly blue eyes flashing.

"We have one chance to turn the tide in this oncoming war. Personally, I'm a fan of bloodshed.

But if I lose my brothers and sisters because of your furry hero complex, I'll hold you personally responsible and ensure the suffering of your entire clan—your mate included. "

"Not if I end you now."

"You'd have to let her go, and we both know you're not going to do that.

" Riven tugs at their clothes as though realizing they've been uncivilized before affecting a friendlier tone steeped in malice.

"Give her time in this place we've now spent three days traveling to. She's stronger than you think."

Riven looks at my wife with a calculated sense of proprietary. There's admiration and attraction, but it's more like she's a rare jewel the vampire can't wait to make part of their collection. "Stronger than even she realizes. This is her destiny, don't rob her of it."

"Hey, if she tells me it's her destiny, I'll move heaven and hell," I say, "but she's mine to protect, not yours to break."

Riven scoffs, but there's tension in their jaw now. Good. I'd hate to be the only one out here twitchy and uneasy and fighting my urge to inflict pain.

Then the trembling starts.

Talia goes completely rigid, her back arching against me.

I tighten the arm I have banded around her middle, desperate to keep her from falling, and feel her begin to convulse.

Her teeth rattle together, and her entire body shakes violently. I'm not sure if it's a seizure, but I imagine this is what they're like. All the color drains from her skin, and fear grips me in its fist and squeezes extra tight.

"Talia! Talia, can you hear me?"

"Pull her out," Riven yells, promptly switching teams on me, but I've already gathered my bride in my arms, cupping her cheek and jostling her slightly, inwardly begging her to come back to me.

"Fucking working on it!" Yelling at the vampire helps untangle the bramble of my emotions so I can focus on what's most useful.

Then, like a hero in a damn fairytale, I take Talia's chin in my hands, twist her face to mine, and crush my mouth to hers in a heated kiss.

Our chemistry and that feral, carnal pull between us is the strongest thing I've ever felt, and I'm desperately hoping it'll break through to her now.

"Come back to me," I whisper, fingers tangling in her hair. "Natalia, we're in this together, remember? I'll find a way in and destroy the entire realm if that's what it takes to pull you out."

Pressure fills the space, popping my ears and leaving my head too heavy for my body. The forest comes to life around us, wind whipping through the trees, birds crying out and leaving branches in a chaotic flutter of wings.

Until all of a sudden I'm thrown backward onto my ass, Talia still in my arms as her spirit crashes into her body.

She comes to with a gasp that immediately turns coughing fit.

I wrap my arms around her, drawing her tight to my chest as she works on catching her breath. "It's okay. I've got you."

She's ice cold and drenched in sweat, trembling and tormented and rocking back and forth, back and forth.

She cranes her neck, her eyes thrown so wide with terror it strikes fear in me as well. "Diego. Is the compound okay? Did you get it put out before it burned?"

At the mention of the compound burning, everything within me shifts, a dark and ugly sensation rising up with a cloud of hate.

“Okay, phew, we’re in a different forest,” she says, rapidly blinking to get her bearings.

At the sharp inhale to our right, so filled with a covetous awe, my instincts have me curling Natalia protectively closer.

That’s when I notice she’s holding something in her hands, gripping it so tightly her knuckles have gone as white as her blanched face.

With pale white bones attached with what looks like dried out strings of intestines, stained with blood and glowing faintly with runes I don’t recognize but instantly distrust.

My heart stutters, an internal tug o’ war taking place within me.

She brought it back, the weapon she risked going into the Hollow to take.

The vampires have their Blood Loom.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Whatever was in there, watching and whispering—promising to teach me to use my powers correctly—came chasing.

The instant I took the weapon from the version of me that followed my mother's warpath, my instincts screamed at me to run.

I'd sprinted across the ever-changing and morphing landscape as fast as I could, headed back in the direction I'd come, the loom gripped so tightly in my hand I'd probably have the imprint on my palm for days.

Enshrouded, other-worldly creatures swooped down at me, like banshees determined to rip the magical tool from me.

Lungs burning, I'd reached the spot where I could see a puckered scar from my original entrance, but no amount of yanking at the threads worked.

They weren't golden or infused with life anymore, and a cold sweat broke out across my skin as a shadowy figure darted around me, too fast to see with my naked eye.

Something told me that bigger, more terrifying presence that spoke to me was in charge, but it's not like I stopped to play twenty questions.

Talons tangled in my hair as the whispering grew louder and louder. A disembodied rasp at my ear demanded I stop being afraid and learn to wield the power my ancestors passed down to me.

Either join us out there or join us in here forever.

The pressure in my head eases as I slowly reorient myself in the present.

Diego's arms are around me, holding me tight as I rock against him, smoothing a hand down my hair as he repeats "It's okay, I've got you" again and again.

I'm dizzy from the lack and then excess of oxygen, as well as the scent of pine filling my nostrils. I was drowning in despair, sure I'd breathed my last breath on earth, when I heard Diego calling my name.

If he hadn't pulled me out, I'm not sure I would've ever escaped. I'd battered my knuckles banging on the walls of a realm that didn't bend or give at the panicked pounding of my fist, cursing myself for ever venturing into a place of utter darkness like that in the first place.

And then, like a lifeline, his hand urgently reached for me in that hazy stitching-together slit between our realm and the Hollow.

As the forest around me continues to sharpen, the werewolf's voice still in my ear, I tell myself I'm safe, if not still a bit disoriented.

No fire, no werewolf children in their beds.

No scary presence pressuring me to embrace who I am or trying to gleefully trap me within the Hollow forever.

My eyes dart to my hand, relief flooding me before exhaustion leaves me sinking further into Diego's embrace. "I did it."

"You did, bruja. You got the weapon—I'm so proud of you." He kisses my temple

and my insides get melty. Normally I'm told how I failed, never that I've done a good job, and that alone makes me want to shed a happy tear or two.

“Yes, now we can change the course of this war,” Riven says, reminding me oh yeah, they're also here. They take a step in my direction, extending their palm and gesturing for me to hand over the tool I've worked so hard to retrieve with a wiggle of their fingers. “Give me the Blood Loom.”

Everything within me tightens with a sense of wrongness that nearly overpowers me. The idea of releasing the bone handles and handing over the weapon...

My stomach roils violently; my skin grows too tight.

Reactions that make me feel like they're asking for an arm or a leg. Not only do I refuse, I've half a mind to threaten to end Riven and any of the other vampires if they even try to come for my loom.

The loom.

Whatever, I don't know what's going on with me, only that this tool became a part of me as soon as I took it from my nightmare version.

Except the deal was to give it over to the vampires.

“Give it to me,” Riven repeats. Their tone is even—almost too even—but there's a sharpness under it.

A hunger.

I tell myself it's not the same, green-eyed monster that has me tightening my grip on the Blood Loom, but I can't be sure. Only that I know I can't hand it over to them yet.

“I barely survived whatever it was in there that chased me across the Hollow and threatened to trap me there forever,” I say, not bothering to keep my voice even so it’s nice and wobbly, “so until we return to the compound, the blade stays with me.”

“That wasn’t the deal,” Riven snaps. “I told you I’d take you to a place where the veil is thin to help you navigate the shadow real, and that’s exactly what I’ve done.

I can travel faster than you, and the vampires are restless to have their magic returned to them—I can’t wait to deliver the good news. ”

Nope, there’s still something in me absolutely screaming not to let Riven take it.

I look to Diego for help, thinking it’s likely in vain, but his arms tighten around me as he lifts us both to our feet.

His muscles are coiled, ready for a fight. Under most any other circumstances, I’d claim there’s no reason for one.

He throws back a protective arm, shielding me the way he did when Riven first showed up at the compound unannounced, but this time I welcome his overprotective tendencies. “You heard her, the blade stays in Talia’s possession until the heads of each clan can meet.”

Riven bares their teeth in a smile that fails to reach their eyes. “We’re not going to war by committee—the vampires are being exterminated, and we will fight back. That’s the weapon we need to prevent the hunters from taking over our cities and towns, including yours.”

“We never said we wouldn’t help you,” I say, despite having no idea how I would be of much assistance besides asking Diego to pledge his pack members.

“Our bargain involves working together to stop the Arcane Tribunal, which we still plan to do. But I can’t just hand over a weapon unless I know whoever bears it can properly wield it, and exactly how they plan to use it. ”

The corner of Riven’s eye twitches. “Had we vampires not told you about it, you wouldn’t even know it exists.”

“Well now we do,” Diego says, radiating menace and the type of stubbornness

rocks break themselves against. “And since you needed us to retrieve it, we’re holding onto it until our safe return. End of story.”

With that, Riven broodily accepts that the decision has been made.

We don’t speak much after that.

We just hike. Through the thick underbrush and winding trails, the loom tucked into my pack, the memory of the Hollow at my back like a shadow still attached to me.

Down the same craggily path we created on our way up, each rock, tree, and shrub making me feel like we’re going in circles even though the slip and slide of my shoes proves we’re headed down.

Down the mountain, down to the vehicles. Three days of down to go, and I can’t stop looking for an escape route.

Given my supernatural companions, I have no illusions of outrunning them both.

It’s not that I don’t trust Diego. It’s that I’m not sure I fully can, and that scares me most of all. Because if he and the werewolves won’t help, I’m dead in the water.

Or am I being overly dramatic, getting so attached to a weapon clearly tucked away somewhere like that for a reason?

If I'm being totally honest, it's probably a little of both.

Our rhythm becomes the crunch of soles against gravel and the occasional snap of twigs. I nearly trip and fall on a mangle of roots twice, but Diego is always there to catch me, a firm hand ringing the upper arm to keep me upright.

As much as I want to speak my whirring thoughts to him, I have to plan my timing perfectly.

I'm eager to return, so I don't stop them for lunch, and even when my stomach growls for its dinner, I keep my rubber legs and burning thighs moving.

Until the sun dips behind the tallest of treetops, staining the sky a mixture of fiery pinks, purples, and golds.

We make camp between a pair of towering pines—they stand alone in a forest that shows signs of being burned. It's been a handful of years, so there's a lot of healing that's been done, but of course it makes me think of the scene in both the Hollow and those of my childhood.

Diego must be on the same wavelength, because as we're building the fire, he gives me a scrunched-forehead expression and asks, "Why did you ask if we put out the fire at the compound before it burned?"

Riven is off hunting for their dinner, but I wouldn't be surprised if they remained within earshot. The only benefit of the quiet has been not having to lie or be extra careful of my words.

“In the Hollow I saw...” Hmm, which parts do I reveal and what do I edit out? I decide to keep it simple, while also skimming over the role I played. “The compound was on fire. I could feel the smoke burning my eyes and my lungs. People were fleeing.”

He swallows thickly, glancing down at the kindling before his shot-of-espresso eyes return to me. “That happened to my village—I was eleven. Conall and I were the only survivors.”

I try to swallow myself but can’t get past the lump in my throat. “That must’ve been hard. I’m so sorry.”

He shrugs a shoulder, then straightens and swipes his palms together. “It’s why I hated you without giving you a chance—even though I know you’re not the one who did it.”

No, but I might’ve been there, and that kills me. More, I’m so afraid of the way he’d look at me if he found out I witnessed the destruction firsthand—if not the burning of his village, ones just like them.

I force my thighs into motion and stand, despite their achy complaints about the days and days of hiking and being put through the ringer. “We have a long history of hating each other, witches and werewolves. Vampires, too, if it makes you feel any better.”

Riven chokes that moment to materialize with a swishing of leaves and a toss of their hair. “Ooh, are we discussing our lifetimes of loathing? I’ve got tomes on the subject, and one thing about being a live for centuries—I’ve read every one, more than once.”

I ramble out enough of a sentence I hope I played off my disappointment, but private time is over, so there goes any chance at having that in-depth conversation with

Diego I urgently need to have.

Several times throughout the evening, while Diego and I have our dinner and the vampire paces the outskirts of the fire, I catch the lustful glances from Riven in my direction.

They're no longer aimed at me, though. There's a naked desire gleaming within the blue each time Riven catches sight of the Blood Loom at my side that scares me.

Two more days of hiking—maybe even one and a half if I'm quick—and we'll be back at the werewolf compound.

Everything I suggest will be safer there, with less chance of my companions killing each other and ripping the blade from me in the process.

But by the time I climb inside the sleeping bag with Diego to get cozy, I'm certain I'm not overreacting.

And that two days might be too long to wait.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Morning sunlight filters through the tent seams, painting the world in gold. The fire outside must've burned low during the night, because the air in here is cool—but not cold. Not with her curled up against me.

I shift onto one hip to lie on my side, prop my head in one hand, and watch her breathe. She looks so peaceful when she sleeps, giving no indication to the fire within that'll blaze to life as soon as she's up.

It takes me a moment to pinpoint why I'm staring at her like this—counting the rise and fall of her chest, cataloging her hums and the tiny, worried noises she's made since returning from the Hollow with the Blood Loom.

Every few minutes like clockwork, and there's no way Riven hasn't also noticed Talia's rising apprehensions.

But I noticed them in a very different way, attuning every breath, every shift—every everything—to Natalia. So that's what's beginning to worry me, though I think it might already be too late to do anything to stop it.

I'm even done pretending it's strictly the bond.

Yesterday, for the first time in... I don't know how long, I was scared.

I hadn't been scared to fight Conall for Alpha—regardless of knowing we'd have to go all out and there'd be broken bones and possibly punctured lungs which hurt like a

bitch. I hadn't been scared to marry a witch, either, just irritated it was necessary for my pack's survival.

But when Talia began to seize in my arms yesterday, it felt like someone punched through my ribcage and fisted my heart, squeezing, weighing whether I got to keep breathing or not. Much worse than a punctured lung or broken ribs, for the record.

I'm falling for her.

As in who she is as a person, not a thought to the incredibly sexy package she came in.

My dick twitches, calling me a liar, and fine. All I do when she's around is have dirty thoughts about her curves and getting her naked and moaning beneath me, and how lucky I am to be the guy who gets to watch it sashay as we hike our way down this mountain.

But underneath all that, as surprising as it is—most of all to me—I admire who she is as a person. From her stubbornness to her humor to that quiet kindness she tries to hide under her sarcasm. All the determined parts of her that keep showing up when others would've given up by now.

She didn't have it easy growing up—no question. And maybe that's why there's something in me that reaches for her, even when my prejudices insist I shouldn't. That wounded part of my soul I like to keep buried—losing my mother, father, and two sisters—it wakes up around her.

I'm not sure if it's being around a witch or if it's telling me not to fail this time around.

It was my job to protect them.

My mother and father were warriors, trained in battle. But my sisters... they were just kids. They'd tease each other endlessly and beg for piggyback rides like the one I gave Talia yesterday. They'd ask me to read them stories in order to fall asleep, and I'd always get talked from one into two.

They didn't get a happy ending. Why should I? Why should any creature responsible for putting them through that? And yes, I meant witches, but I'm not sure what I mean anymore.

For the first time in this whole forced-marriage process, I actually let myself imagine a child of my own. One that's part me, part Talia.

My youngest sister had caramel-colored highlights in her hair, her skin fair enough we teased her she was the gringo of the family.

In my mind's eye, I see a little one with my coloring and caramel-colored curls, an adorable blend of me and Talia that looks a bit like Mariana.

As my youngest sister was also our prissiest family member, the comparison makes me smile bigger.

I can see them laughing with Conall and Kerrigan's kid as we all watch on from the porch. Giving them the safe place to run and play we dreamed of giving others one day.

That's a future worth fighting for.

A protective surge slams into me so hard that my fangs elongate, the tips of my claws coming out to dig into my palms as I clench my fists and blow a breath out my nose. I'll do anything to keep the woman sleeping next to me safe.

Talia's breath hitches, picking up as her eyelashes flutter open. With a contented hum, she stretches against me. The thin fabric of my T-shirt does very little to hide the nipples now pressing forward to greet the morning, much like my morning wood's cropped up again to say hello.

Despite the slight discomfort as I shift from a less squished position, I can't complain.

I get to lie here, watching Talia greet the day, the sunlight glimmering in her curls and dancing over her skin as if equally eager to get its hands on her.

I reach out and drag a couple of knuckles down her cheek, marveling at how soft she is. "Morning, gorgeous."

One corner of her mouth kicks up in a crooked smile—a stark contrast to how she looked at me before we came on this trip and hiked our asses off. "Hey," she murmurs, a hint shyly.

Last night I carried her into the tent, stripped her of her clothes and slipped on my oversized T-shirt, and tucked her next to me to pour more warmth and comfort into her.

She'd about hiked herself to exhaustion, blistered and sunburned and dehydrated to unacceptable levels.

Until I took her choice of resting away, tucking her next to me and kissing her forehead before telling her that I'd take care of everything else—her only job was to sleep.

The way she sinks her teeth into her lip and looks me up and down, however, says she's nice and rested.

And recalling our first sweaty session in the tent between the sheets.

Or in this instance— what happens in the sleeping bag stays in the sleeping bag —and I never want things to turn chilly ever again.

I'm just also not sure how realistic that is.

She lifts herself up on her elbows, which only draws more attention to the fact that she's still braless and pantsless in my tent. Her smooth legs slide against my hairy legs and there's no subtly adjusting this time.

My cock's standing at full attention in a pitch of its own.

Talia doesn't seem to notice, sitting up in a rush and glancing around her at everything besides me, and now I'm just offended. "Am I running late? Is the rest of the Supernatural Adventure Club awake already?"

"Again, I don't sleep," Riven answers, their voice drifting from somewhere near the fire pit—the same fire pit I wouldn't mind feeding them to.

"Well, you might wanna get lost," I say, slipping a hand beneath the hem of Talia's shirt to palm one of those glorious breasts I haven't been able to stop staring at all morning. "It's about to get noisy in here. We've got an heir to make."

They make disgusted noise. "I'll go hunt for my breakfast, as listening to you fumble around as is last on my list of fun activities. But try and leave me, Moon-mutt, and I'll be sleeping between you tonight."

Joke was on them. If I convinced my bride to let me carry her for at least part of the way, we'd be out of these woods before that. "Yeah, yeah. Go drink your blood latte like a good little parasite."

I perk my ears and wait a few beats. When I'm sure the vampire's gone, I slide my hand to the center of Talia's stomach to rest, not rove.

Don't get me wrong—I want to make her scream my name so loud Riven hears it across the valley. But, oddly enough, fucking her breathless isn't my first thought.

Wanting her safe is.

“How do you feel?” I ask, locking my gaze on hers to catch the real answer, not the one she might try to pass off. “After yesterday and whatever happened in there?”

“Uh...” She shrugs a shoulder. “Complicated.”

Well, that's confusing as hell, and her expression isn't giving anything away.

“I don't mind complicated. I'm a real saint like that.” I draw a halo over my head in case she needs help seeing it.

“Right now, I think I'd rather have a devil.” She switches from cagey to vixen and runs a finger down my chest, so we're not done with that topic, but who am I to refuse a request like that?

“That can definitely be arranged,” I say, her banter enough to tell me she's okay.

At least okay enough for me to make a home between her thighs, and then I'll figure out how to fix the rest.

“Oh, can you do that without going full fur and fangs?” she asks saucily.

“Yeah, that's the easy part.” I take a risk, attempting to chase the last of the worry that's not quite clearing the green of her irises. “The hard part is jutting against your

leg.”

“I noticed,” she says, and we both glance down at the evidence of my situation.

“It’s noticeable.”

Talia’s giggle fills the entire tent, lighting me up from the inside. Then she throws a leg over my waist and straddles me, and I grunt—failing spectacularly to play it cool.

I jerk my chin at my oversized T-shirt. “Take it off. This isn’t a PG-13 movie.” I pause immediately after issuing the bossy joke. “You’ve seen a few of those, right?”

She laughs again, that warm, addictive sound I want to hear every day.

“Yes, and little secret?” She toys with the hem of the shirt, lifting it a torturously slow inch at a time.

“I snuck my heavily restricted laptop into bed to watch R-rated movies while my mom was asleep sometimes. I might’ve picked up a few moves. ”

“Honey, I’m afraid I’m going to need you to show them to me,” I say, rising up to kiss her and help rid her of that shirt a little faster.

In my excitement, there’s a bit of a collision with fabric and hair and mouths and arms. It makes us giggly and giddy, and the last of the tension in my chest finally eases.

That knot of panic I carried last night—the fear I could lose her—unravels. Maybe I overreacted. Chalk it up to the Hollow. Chalk it up to nearly watching the woman I’m falling for disappear forever.

We retrieved the weapon. We're on our way home. We'll save the day, and everything will be fine.

But first things first—I'm going to make love to this woman I suddenly want to call mine.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

I straddle Diego, his body warm and solid beneath mine, unable to breathe without taking in the scent of pine and him.

There's a hunger in his eyes, yes—but there's something else too. Something deeper.

Love might be too big a word, too dangerous to use this soon. But what I feel right now? It goes beyond lust. It's belonging. It's safety.

His hands trail up my bare thighs, slow and reverent, like he's cataloging and savoring every inch. I rock my hips against him, feeling the delicious friction of his arousal pressing against my very center, and a low growl escapes him.

“That's it,” he murmurs, arching against me and increasing the incredible friction. “Just like that.”

My moan fills the entire tent and I'm sure our campground, too, but I'm too turned on to care if Riven can hear us.

“You're fucking gorgeous, you know that? Watching you ride me is the best thing I've seen in...It's the best thing I've seen.”

Dragging myself over his intoxicating length, I lean down, letting my hair fall like a curtain around us as I kiss him. The kiss is urgent and electrifying, our mouths moving together in a heated tangle of tongues and need.

Diego cups the back of my neck, guiding me where he wants me in the most incredible of ways. His other hand cups my breast. He kneads, and then his thumb finds my nipple. He plays it—plays me. Each strum across it sends a shockwave through my core, pleasure shivering through my entire body.

I moan as I lean into his touch, mewling so he knows I want more.

He buries his head in my neck, lavishing kisses up the column as I continue to rock against him. All that's left between us is the thin cotton of my panties and his boxer briefs, but there's still too much fabric and space.

“I could worship you all day,” Diego rasps, dragging his mouth along my collarbone, so it would seem we're finally on the same wavelength about something. “But right now, I need to feel you. All of you.”

“Then stop teasing and take me,” I dare him, brazen in my desire in a way I've never been before.

His hands slide to my hips, anchoring me to him as he rolls us so that he's on top. He slides off my underwear and rids himself of his, tossing them aside before pinning me to the ground.

There's nothing hurried about the way Diego sits back and appraises my body, which is as intoxicating as it is sexually frustrating.

“Patience,” he teases, so I reach out and grip his cock.

He groans, but he doesn't get to the ravishing right away—as if proving he's in charge, and in this instance, I don't care, he can have it.

As long as he fucks me already.

With a wicked grin, Diego finally dips his head, but he takes his sweet time peppering kisses along my ribs, my stomach, and then at long last my thighs...

Until I'm trembling with anticipation.

“What's wolf in Spanish?” I ask breathily.

I can tell the question takes him off-guard, his brown eyes hazed over with lust when he peers up my body at me. By the moon, that's sexy.

“Lobo.”

Yeah, that sounded familiar—I probably would've thought of it myself if I wasn't caught up in how skilled he is at worshipping my body. I doubted it would sound as sexy as when he called me bruja, but I decided to give it a try anyway.

“You're driving me loco, mi lobo.” I grin, pretty proud of myself for using two whole words in Spanish, and Latin incantations—as well as Diego—had helped me considerably.

His eyes darken, the fingers at my hip tighten, and my heart skips out of control. “Say it again.”

“That you're driving me crazy? I wouldn't have thought?—”

Diego thrusts into me with a growl. “You know what I mean, bruja.”

I tremble slightly as I adjust to his side, shifting until I find the spot where it slides home. “Mi lobo, mi lobo, mi lobo.”

He places a palm low on my stomach, dragging the heel of it down, down, down so

that it presses against my clit each time he thrusts into me.

We move together in a rhythm that's all ours—timed to the heartbeat pounding in my ears, our breathless groans, the whispered promises he presses against my skin.

“You're mine,” he says, his voice low and rough. “Mine to protect. Mine to fuck.” He withdraws and thrusts into me again, so deep I lose my breath. “Mine to love.”

The words undo me. I clutch at his shoulders, wrapping my legs around his waist, meeting each thrust with my own desperate need.

Until I come apart with his name on my lips, pleasure unraveling me like a runaway spool.

I watch as my wolf moves over me, feeling a surge of feminine power at watching a man with such tremendous strength bend to my will.

With a groan he follows me over the edge, his body shuddering above mine.

I cling tighter to him as he rides out the wave, anchoring us both like he usually anchors me.

We lie there catching our breath, the morning light filtering through the tent, the world hushed and still.

And for the first time in what feels like forever, I let myself believe in the possibility of a future—of hope.

Of love.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The trail curves upward, damp earth soft beneath our hiking boots. I shift the weight of my pack higher on my shoulder and follow the invisible thread tethering me to Talia. She hikes a few feet ahead, curls bouncing, humming under her breath like this is just a nature stroll while Riven sulks.

It's almost like they've switched places. Since the vampire's been a thorn in my side since they arrived at my wedding, I can't help but be extra amused by that.

Although our dangerous mission went disturbingly well, so I'm not sure why Riven's so damn moody.

They certainly didn't hesitate to jab at Talia and me when we were arguing and fighting our sexual tension on the hike up—then there was the blatant flirting with my wife—so again, struggling to care, though Talia's trying.

Talia. Natalia. My wife.

Her ass.

Her laugh.

My growing obsession with her is the only thing going through my head, a record stuck on repeat.

I should be focused on our surroundings—the rustle of branches overhead; the distant

bird calls; our sketchy vampire companion; and how much farther we have to go.

But mostly I'm replaying the taste of Talia's skin and all the needy little noises she made as I moved inside her this morning.

I could live in that moment for the rest of my goddamn life.

I'd convinced myself this trip would be about duty. Finding the Blood Loom. Protecting the pack. Enduring my forced marriage to a witch.

Suddenly it's become so much more.

Talia slows as we reach a break in the trees. A stream cuts through the forest, wide and glittering in the noonday sun. She waits until I draw even, then glances up at me with that unreadable expression she's so good at giving me.

"I need to sit by the river and cool my blistered feet for a bit," she says.

"We need to return home and use our weapon for the war we're embroiled in," Riven snaps. "Your fragile human needs are even more bothersome on the way down—just suck it up and let your pup carry you the rest of the way."

Well now we have to soak our feet and take our sweet time.

I stretch out my fingers and take her hand. "Take your time. Whatever you need, baby."

"Come with me?" There's a hint of desperation creeping into her voice and the green eyes she turns on me.

"Fucking humans," Riven says, storming toward a shady cluster of trees.

“I’m a witch, fuck you very much,” Talia calls after them, so I guess she’s done placating the vampire. I have to hide my grin behind my fist, but if I’m being honest, I don’t try very hard.

Let the bloodsucker see she chose me.

More than that, though, I’m proud. I know she doesn’t stand up for herself very much, and I think that’s the first time she referred to herself as a witch that I didn’t flinch.

“This way.” Her voice is soft, but the undercurrent is serious.

We veer off the main trail, following the water downstream. The hum of insects grows louder, the air thick with the smell of moss and pine and something faintly sweet—like crushed wildflowers underfoot.

As we near the river, I hope talking isn’t what she came here to do because it’s way too fucking noisy.

“Is this loud enough to drown out what we say?” she asks, and I’m about to reply yeah, that’s exactly what I was thinking.

“If we find a place upstream”—I speak loudly, my throat waking up after a stretch of silence— “it’ll be calmer near the bend.”

She shakes her head. “I mean can Riven hear what we say if we stand here?”

Oh. This is a different kind of talk, and I’m not sure why I’m nervous. I rub my palms over my jeans like I’m an awkward kid in high school, worried his girlfriend is about to dump him before the big dance.

“They won’t be able to hear us,” I answer, my nerves prickling. “I can hardly sort out the noise from here.”

“Perfect.” Talia pulls off her pack and crouches beside the stream, staring at the ripples like they might contain the secrets of the universe.

Is she really going to drop a bomb like that and then play in the water? “I gotta say, suspense effectively built. You’re killing me here—what’s going on?”

She gestures me down next to the water, and I slide my pack off and crouch next to her on the damp grass.

“There’s something I need to tell you,” she says without looking up. “I wasn’t sure... but then today it’s still here and it’s not like I have anyone else I can trust.”

“Thank you?”

Flustered, Talia runs a hand over her face. “Shit, sorry. Why is this so hard?”

My muscles go tight. “This is getting worse and worse by the second, and I don’t even know what this is.”

“It’s not bad, exactly,” she hedges, “but it’s important. And weird. Which is why I didn’t want to say anything until I was sure.”

“Okay,” I say carefully. “I’m all ears.”

As if afraid to commit to her plan before this very moment, she nods to herself and settles more fully in place. “I’m choosing to trust you. I need to be able to trust you.”

“You can trust me,” I promise, letting my vow ring through the words.

After glancing around one last time, she looks me dead in the eye and says, “There’s something off about the Blood Loom. The vampires aren’t telling us everything.”

My gut clenches. “You think it’s a trap?”

“I think there’s more to it than they let on.

And not just because it’s carved from someone’s freaking femur and etched with coven runes,” she adds, her mouth twisting.

“The way Riven’s acting only confirms my fears.

It’s more than a way to amplify their magic, Diego.

And this is where it gets weird, it’s also... connected to me.”

Foreboding causes the back of my neck and my scalp to tingle. I already know I’m not going to like the answer—that it’s going to be connected to witch magic and I’m still trying to be okay with that.

I lick my lips and force out the low question, all too aware of why we needed the noisy water to cover our conversation now. No matter how I try to twist it around in my head, if we don’t hand over the loom, we’ll be going to war with the vampires.

I’m not saying I’m not willing, but I’d like a lot more information before sentencing any of my pack members to die. “Connected how?”

“In the Hollow a voice told me I was deeply connected to the loom and the power within the shadow realm. And when I found the loom... I was holding it. Not me, but a different version of me if that makes sense.” She shakes her head again.

“I mean, I know that doesn’t make sense, but it’s like the loom...

recognized me. Like it belongs to me. Like it’s meant to be mine.”

The words settle over me like a chill.

“And not in a power-hungry way,” she says, her voice so quiet my ears have to strain to hear, even from right beside her.

“In a protective way. Like the Blood Loom truly could be the key to changing the tide of this war, but only if it’s used by the right person, and I know down in my bones, that’s me.

“Because if the vampires or anyone else gets their hands on it...”

“They’ll use it for bad. Basically,” I add when that sounds too simple for what we’re dealing with.

“What do you want me to do?”

Tears rise in her eyes, and I’m afraid I’ve said something wrong until she lunges and wraps her arms around my neck. “Thank you,” she says.

She sits back on her heels, her expression resolved where worry was before. “Riven wasn’t kidding when they said the vampires are running out of patience. Once we return to the compound, we’ll tell them that we need to study it more. They’ll be mad but it’ll give us time to figure things out.”

Talia sinks her teeth into her lower lip, back to worried once again. “Actually no, they’ll summon vampires who’ll come running the instant they find out.”

I nod. She's not wrong. I didn't want to tell her that her original plan was far too optimistic, but the information is too heavy for me to celebrate.

This whole mission just went from done and about to wrap up nicely to entirely fucked within a handful of hours.

“Diego, I need you to help me protect it at all costs,” she says quietly, her hand drifting to the pack where she's secured the loom. “I need you to keep it safe, not just from Riven and the rest of the vampires... but from everybody.”

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:10 am

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The clearing is eerily quiet—no birdsong, no rustle of wind. Just my wheezy breaths and the sound of boots scuffing against pine needles and loose soil.

Something's wrong, I think, trying to aim the thought at Diego, but he's bringing up the rear, making it damn near impossible.

Every spark that's connected to a living creature has cleared the area; even the plants seem to be shrinking away.

I slow my pace, and Riven does as well, glancing at me with an unreadable expression. They've been closed off and pouty since I requested the time by the water. But they could keep on pouting because Diego was going to help me, and right now that was keeping me going.

It's when his head jerks up like Riven's arriving at camp that my blood goes cold.

He plants his feet and rolls his shoulders, a snarl curling his lips.

Pressure pops in the air, like we're standing beneath a thundercloud that's about to aim its bolt of lightning directly at us.

“Backstabbing parasite.” Diego flings the insult at Riven as his muscles roll and convulse beneath his skin.

“I'm not the one who went back on our deal,” Riven says, so I'm clearly the only one

in the dark, even though I knew something was off. “But to save you any mental anguish, this would’ve happened either way. The only question was whether I’d steal your bride.”

At that, Diego explodes, all fur and fury and bones that snap and twist with brutal efficiency. His clothes are in shreds as his jaw elongates, hands forming claws as he lunges and surges forward, gray and silver fur rippling over his skin in a fast-moving wave.

Massive and seething, he charges toward Riven with lethal intent.

The vampire meets him in the middle, a blur of motion and talons and violence.

Riven’s fist connects with Diego’s ribs, and while it sends him backward several feet, he doesn’t falter—he digs his claws into the ground, leaving lines scored into the grass, then goes from skidding to propelling.

He opens his mouth as he lunges with a roar, snapping Riven’s arm in his snout filled with jagged teeth.

The vampire yelps and swears up a storm, delivering blow after blow onto Diego’s wolfish shoulders. He stands firm, but I can see the impact the hits have on him and, at the tiny yelp that escapes him, everything within me screams out, wishing I could do more—but what?

Blood more black than red drips from his jaw, the ichor staining his storm-gray fur and the ground. Clamping tighter, he gives his monstrous head a shake, flinging Riven around like a chew toy.

His attention drifts, bones shifting and morphing beneath the surface, until a few of his human features peek out from the lupine—frankly, he looks absolutely terrifying.

“Talia, run!” he yells, the command coming out garbled through his teeth.

But why would I run? Isn't he winning?

Riven dislocates their shoulder as if it's nothing, jerking free of Diego's maw with a hard kick directly to his poor sensitive nose, and that's it—I've got to stop standing here and use some fucking magic already.

“Don't worry about me,” I shriek, rummaging through my pack for something I can use to amplify my powers, because other than being connected to the capillary system of the world, my magic is more of a party trick. “Just kick their ass!”

They both hit the ground in a tumble of dust, moving too fast for me to entirely follow.

The back of my neck burns, the creepy-crawly wrongness hitting me extra strong...

Then half a dozen vampires step from the thicket of trees, practically floating into the clearing.

Oh. So that 's why Diego was telling me to run.

The fact of the matter is it's already too late. Nothing in my bag seems like anything that'll help, and my attention keeps drifting outside the bag to where the Blood Loom's secured.

It hums as I hover my palm over the handle, emitting a high-pitched squeal like it senses the action and yearns to join in.

As I wrap my hands around the bone handles, it vibrates, the runes along its surface pulsing like a heartbeat.

This magical weapon of untold power wants me to use it more than anything. It's whispering once again that it belongs to me.

That it wants me to feed it.

And it wants blood.

It's overpowering how much I crave rushing over to the puddles of gore left from Riven and Diego's scuffle.

But I don't have time for that or to contemplate how or why the Blood Loom does what it does, so I stand with the ghastly tool in my hands and attempt to track the vampires as they fan out and rush forward.

Six huge vampires who looked like they trained by tackling grizzly bears, uprooting trees, and bench-pressing coffins pin their focus on me.

Each of them eerily pale and strapped for battle, with the hilts of their swords crossed at their back. And they're all coming for the loom.

Diego hurls Riven into two of the advancing vampires, sending them rolling like bowling pins. Then he's a wall of fur and muscle in front of me, snarling and baring his bloodied teeth like he's daring them to make his day.

I reach out a hand and gently pet the spot of fur most matted with blood, worried about my wolf and doing my best to see how bad the injury is while surrounded by seven vampires.

They stand like statues for what seems like an eternity, eyes narrowed, watching and waiting.

“Give us the Blood Loom and we can all go on our way,” Riven says, peering around Diego the best they can to look at me.

My furry husband responds by aiming his growl directly at them, curling himself around me like a canine force field.

“Don’t pretend to we’re friends now,” I say to Riven. “You already showed your hand, and it’s that you’re a traitor.”

“Give me the loom!” they scream, and my heart hammers against my ribcage and pumps more fear through my veins.

Part of me thinks I’m being really stupid. I don’t even know what this fucking thing does and I’m not only risking my safety but also Diego’s.

The Blood Loom’s hum turns high-pitched and hungry.

I fumble around with the handles, trying to figure out the best way to keep it in my possession.

Use it.

I can’t tell whether it’s me or a voice from the weapon, but I instantly know it’s either use it or lose it.

The runes pulse as the vampires tighten their formation; Diego’s ears and muzzle twitch wildly as he attempts to keep them all in his sights.

Harried, I check the ground for a rock or sharp stick I can use to slice my palm and feed the loom what it so badly wants...

What I see is the crimson blood dripping from Diego's wounds splattering the pine needles and dirt.

I stretch out a palm and swipe it through some of the blood around his injury, trying not to think about what I'm doing while stressing that I'm doing it wrong.

Whatever it is I'm even doing.

Time's up, so I drag the blood over the intestinal strings of the loom, my hands smeared with lifeblood as instinct tells me how and where to grip it.

"Don't," Riven hisses, hurling a dagger at Diego's body. "You have no idea what you're doing—you're going to ruin everything."

Hello, that was my entire goal. "You should've told me what we were actually dealing with from the beginning," I say, despite not fully knowing myself at this very moment.

The loom drinks in the blood I feed it greedily, and the forest gradually fades, no vampires, no protective werewolf.

I'm there again.

Inside the Hollow.

Darkness creeps along the edges of my reality, the threads I usually see in the other realm a red and black ichor, pulsing around me like I've landed myself in a chamber of a heart.

I'm not afraid like I was before. In fact, I almost want someone to attack me so I can unleash my power.

Or the loom's power. I can't tell, and right now, I don't care.

I fight through the fog, stepping a foot into my realm, where Diego's countering attack after attack, keeping me safe as electricity flows molten through my arms and legs.

It's slightly dizzying and exceedingly intoxicating.

All the magic that seemed to be closed off to me before surges from bottom to top, an iridescent green flickering at the tips of my fingers.

"Get back," I command the attacking vamps, my voice echoing as if far away.

Those golden threads that've been my constant companion for as long as I remember bend to my will, forming a fist I slam into the vampires nearest Diego.

It flings the guy next to him backward as well, ass over heels. They lie there stunned, struggling to understand what hit them.

Awesome.

Tingly excitement bubbles up, along with the confidence I always ran short on.

There you are, precious threadling. I'm so glad you've returned.

This time the voice doesn't scare me—doesn't imitate me. It can't keep me here. I walk between realms.

"Oh, I'm not here to stay," I say, and through the haze, Riven and the other vampire to my right tilt their heads with curiosity.

But I'm not afraid of them overpowering me anymore, either.

Gathering my strength, I borrow a little life force from a nearby tree and braid it into a rope. Gripping it on either side, I loop it around the throat of the vampire sinking his teeth into Diego's shoulder—as the two on his other side land brutal blows to his back and ribs.

As the vampire I'm choking out tugs against the tether, fingers scrabbling for a rope he can't see, I feel his struggle.

No, I bask in it.

I wind that rope around my fist and yank, watching with glee as it begins to lacerate his throat, black ichor spilling down his front.

He drops to his knees, writhing and choking on his own gore.

See, I think at the darkness. I don't need you to teach me how to bring my enemies to their knees.

Yes, the shadows answer, but it's only by fully embracing your power that you'll be able to unlock your destiny.

After a beat that's forever and a blip, a twisted sort of delight floods our connection. Shall we put you to the test, then?

My heart skitters, forgetting how to beat. I so want to be strong enough—to earn praise and tap into my true power.

But I don't want to be my mother.

My failures flicker like a lowlights reel in my head, and suddenly I'm recounting how many tests of hers I failed.

How much I disappointed her.

I lose my focus not only on the realm where Diego's still fighting five of the vampires.

It's all I can do to use the rope that once felt so strong to string the vampire up in a tree.

In that moment, fury burning so bright through me, I would've kept tugging on that rope until I sliced clean through his throat if I could.

I'm still not strong enough.

Shit, now both worlds are growing hazy.

Smoke stings my eyes and obscures my vision. I tell myself I'm breathing oxygen back in my realm, so I don't need to worry about the wheeze and strain in my lungs in the shadow realm.

But it's not working.

Without warning, I'm the me I don't want to be—hair wild, eyes glowing with madness like my mother's did as she burned villages.

My face is twisted into something vicious. Fire swirls behind me. People scream.

I feel merriment, with a side of exhilarating power.

My mother's voice echoes in the smoke, except it's coming from me .

Let them burn, I say, and I'm fairly certain I'm speaking in both realms now. Survival and power aren't given; they're taken.

"Natalia! Come back to me." Diego's voice is so far away, but the tug of the mate bond is impossible to ignore.

I stumble a few steps, but then my werewolf suffers a huge blow—a fucking sword driven into his back. As he staggers closer to me and the pocket of space he's kept me protected in, I see the grisly gash that splits open his snout.

No!

I yell it, but it doesn't make a sound.

With a roar, I gather my power as well as every golden thread I can get my hands on. I form a curved blade like a scythe, all I have to do is drive it into a shriveled vampire heart.

I look at Riven, thinking of the double-crossing and how they got us into this mess and pretended to be my friend. How they forced me into a place filled with nightmares, forcing me to take all the risk only to turn around and betray us.

They ambushed us.

My survival means their death.

At the bottom of my blade, I form a long chain to help me swing my weapon around, turning it into a kusarigama from anime—a lethally tipped whip I can defend myself with.

And I'm out for blood.

My mother's face flashes as I hurl the end with the razor-sharp sickle, superimposing itself over mine from that fiery scene in the Hollow.

I miss Riven's heart and hit their shoulder instead, but that's not the whole truth. My hatred and desire to kill them broke for a fraction of a second, letting in the snarky comments and the times they made me laugh during our hikes.

Diego goes down at my side with three vampires on his back.

The blade is still protruding from way too close to his heart, and it lodges deeper as the vampires pummel him from both sides. The light in his eyes is beginning to fade.

Everything is falling apart at the same time the realms begin stitching themselves back together.

Threatening to close me off in the Hollow.

I'm running for the exit and sprinting with everything in me, and I'm not going to make it. Why would Diego fight so hard for me? All I am is a weakness.

In the distance I hear his deep timbre, his throat raw as he booms, "Don't you fucking touch her!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

My threat is still echoing through the clearing when I collapse, my knees giving out like a house with rotted beams. Pain blooms in my chest as the blade, still wedged between my ribs, grinds against bone. The sharp tip nips at my heart, a breath away from piercing the organ.

Lodged in there so long it's become a scream that lives inside me, raw and ragged, clawing for release.

My jaw hangs crookedly from my skull, the skin of my cheek gone, leaving behind only muscle and ligament. I'm still in half-form, a nightmarish amalgamation of human and beast, my ability to shift to either wolf or human seemingly broken for the moment.

Blood bubbles in my lungs, hot and tasting of copper, before spilling from my mouth and my wounds, forming a puddle beneath me. Every breath is a war, and I'm losing.

You have to get up. This fight isn't over.

You have to keep Talia safe.

I go to speak, but all that comes out is a gurgling noise.

Through the haze of agony, I at least sense that Talia has come back to herself. She's returned to me, both to this realm and herself.

For a moment, the bond pulsed so dark I thought I might've lost her.

It scared the shit out of me.

I drag myself through pine needles, twigs, and soil, crawling toward her and pushing to all-fours. It's shaky and I'm gargling foamy blood, but I get there—between her and the advancing vampires.

She's trembling, the Blood Loom still tight in her grip.

That weapon she summoned out of the air, though, is gone. There's no trace of the gauzy rope she secured the vampire to a tree with—he's with the rest of the gang now.

I only killed one and maimed two more and they've already mostly regenerated. What a failure.

“Do I take out the sword, or...?” Talia asks in a shaky voice.

“Take...out,” I wheeze, my gaze constantly shifting between the vampires. “Not until... have opening.”

Riven snorts. “An opening. Sure. Think you can dodge us all, little witch?”

Talia's eyes dart to mine, wide and frantic, and I can see her calculating the number of vampires still able to fight.

And how to remove the sword while keeping them at bay and holding onto the loom.

I don't have to count to know she can't do all that herself, which is why I'm about to get my second wind.

Any second now.

“Tal,” I croak, but it’s more a wheeze than a name. “I’m…”

“You’ve lost, it’s over,” Riven says. “We just need the Blood Loom and we’ll be on our way.” Their gaze moves to me. “You want to save her, that’s how to ensure she gets out of this alive.”

Traitorous blue eyes flick to Talia. “It’s how you pull out the sword and save him before he suffers any more damage. How long do you think he can keep regenerating his lungs until there’s not enough breath left in them to keep going?”

At least I know Talia would never give up the loom for me, and I’ll do everything within me to keep my promise to protect it and her at all costs.

“Okay,” she says, actually extending the weapon toward Riven.

“No,” I say. Well, gargle. I try to aim the idea of creating a distraction at her so I can dislodge the blade myself, but I can barely lift my head.

Eyes as green as the surrounding forest zero in on me, enough tenderness filling them that I must look even worse than I feel. “I can’t watch you die.” Her voice cracks at the end, defeat hanging in every line of her body as she stretches her arm that final inch.

Riven snatches the loom from Talia’s fingers, whipping it to their chest with a frantic sort of reverence.

“While I have my mission, I do have a spot for you, Realmweaver. You could come with us. The vampires could offer you protection and freedom… No forced marriage, no repressing who you are or your true power.”

Natalia doesn't hesitate; she drops to her knees next to me, a hand going to my shoulder,

tears streaking her beautiful face. "Fucking go," she yells at the vampires.

Surprisingly, they do.

I roar in pain as Talia yanks the sword from my back. It's agony and then it's better, but then it's much, much worse.

My breaths are wet and not right, and I brace my weight on my hands and retch until there's nothing left.

Hands slick with blood, Talia tosses the heavy sword aside and returns to my side to survey the rest of my injuries.

Hope sparks as a few of my surface-level wounds begin to stitch themselves together. I was too hurt to attempt to heal any part of my body before. With my regenerative powers slowly returning, that means my lungs will stop being lakes of blood, right?

Gradually I'm able to take sips of air until my breaths are no longer liquid or too thick. My chest heaves as I greedily gulp in oxygen, and Talia flings her body over mine, minding my injuries as she hugs me.

I thought she'd shy away from my werewolf side, but she's buried her face in my fur, and having her arms around me while I lie there and recover takes some of the edge off the pain.

Each panted breath I take is getting more productive by the second, and with the gash from the sword clotting and knitting itself together, remaining alive feels more doable again.

It's typically easier to regenerate in wolf form, but as I regain use of my limbs, I morph into my human form and roll onto my back so I can keep Talia curled next to me.

We stare up at the stars above, oddly peaceful against the mayhem we've just endured. I can't stop running my hands over Talia to assure myself she's really okay.

But I know that she's not, and it's my fault.

"I failed you," I whisper, barely able to get the words out through the fire in my chest.
"I'm so fucking sorry."

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

At the agony in Diego's voice—not over his injuries but failing me—I roll so that I'm lying square on his chest and place my hands on either side of his head.

Tears pool in my eyes, blurring his handsome face. Still streaked with blood, his jaw constantly reforming beneath the surface, and yet his espresso eyes fill with me. “No, you saved me. I was losing myself in the Hollow—you pulled me out. You took on seven vampires for me.”

“And lost.”

I shake my head. “I never dreamed they'd ambush us, or that you'd have to take on a bunch of vampires alone. I asked too much.”

Now he's shaking his head, and aren't we a sad pair?

“I wasn't alone—I had you.”

My heart does a wobbly flop-splat in my chest. Nobody had ever treated me like my help mattered.

We did make a pretty incredible team when we stopped fighting and worked together.

It doesn't change the unfortunate truth, though.

We lost it, and it's about to turn the supernatural war in the wrong direction, I can

feel it.

“We have to get back that loom. I felt its power, and I know down to my bones that the amount of destruction the vampires will do with it will be devastating—for humans and supernatural creatures alike.

As much as I want to lie on Diego and cuddle for an evening under the stars while we recover, there’s no time.

We’re dealing with powers that are much bigger than us.

We’re talking the type of shit that changes the course of the universe.

“If I can just get a hold of the Blood Loom again, I can open up the Hollow and put the weapon back where I found it. Then I’ll seal it up inside for good.”

Diego’s slowly nodding, not quite as enthusiastically onboard as I would’ve hoped. “Okay, so we’ve got to get it back and fight off the vamps as we return to the summit where magic is the strongest, and then you can seal it off?” He taps his finger to his lip. “We’re going to need reinforcements.”

“Yes to reinforcements—I definitely need the help of the werewolves to retrieve the loom, and it’s going to be a battle for sure. Once it’s in my possession, I’ll use it to amplify my powers and open up a portal to the Hollow.” I give a little curtsy. “No need for a three-day hike.”

“Thank God,” he utters, and I smile despite our in-over-our heads situation. He would hike back up there for me in a heartbeat, fighting off vampires the entire way.

I’m one more dreamy declaration from falling in love with him completely.

“Yeah, I’d like the hiking portion of our honeymoon to be over already,” I say. “We’ll just unzip a door, toss that fucker inside and have you pull me back out, then we’ll never do another deal with the vampires.”

“Deal,” Diego says, the side of his face that’s fully formed smiling while the side that’s red and shiny-looking tries.

“And who said marriage was hard?” I ask.

He huffs a laugh. “It’s really just about compromise, after all.”

Our jokes do their job, breaking some of the tension.

Still, as we gather what’s left of our gear, unease churns through my body, the logical side of my brain screaming that we’re still up against huge odds.

“I’m too slow,” I say, not quite asking him to carry me like he’s offered a dozen times before but walking him right up to it.

“Yes,” he says, and I shoot him a scowl he finds incredibly funny.

He’s going to make me ask, and how can he still be so incredibly pigheaded when so many lives hang in the balance?

How can I?

“Diego, my dearest husband, whom I promised to throttle and to hold?—”

“Ah, that’s where our miscommunication started.” He’s already naked from his last transformation and the subsequent battle, so he doesn’t have to strip before he drops to all fours.

I hear the growing-familiar crack and pop of his bones as he shifts. Then the gray, golden-eyed hound stands before me like I'm a girl who asked for a pony for Christmas, only to get this beast instead.

I look for a foothold. "In sickness and in health, in wolf form and human..."

"Till death do us part," Diego finishes through gnarled teeth, his face a disturbingly human-wolf hybrid. "But don't worry, bruja. Neither of us is dying today."

By the time we reach the outer perimeter of the compound, every muscle aches and burns, but there's no time to rest.

Sasquatch, Elias, and Gideon meet us as soon as we reach pack territory, their expressions grim.

"Scouts picked up movement," the massive ginger security guard informs Diego, as if he hasn't received enough bad news lately. "Coming from the East, fifty-to-sixty vampires, all warriors."

"We also picked up a trace of Riven, along with a few others, cutting through the woods and heading toward the same area," Elias adds.

Suddenly it hits me, what probably should've dawned on me sooner. My stomach sours, dread curdling in my throat. "They've struck a deal with Andromeda."

All of the werewolves besides Diego look at me awkwardly, as if they weren't sure how to break the news.

No, they weren't sure if I was in on the betrayal.

Even though they don't know me and have no idea what we've been through these

past five days, it still hurts.

“Yes,” says Sasquatch slowly, studying me with intense, amber-hued eyes as if they’re the only lie detector he needs. “It appears the vampires have teamed up with the Oldenwilde and Ironwood Covens.”

Of course she had a double-crossing backup plan.

My mother. The woman who never saw me as anything more than a puppet and pawn for her legacy. She forced me to marry a werewolf, only to team up with the vampires who nearly killed him.

Diego’s jaw tightens, the barely healed skin of his face pulling with the motion.

“Not surprising, but it proves we need to act quickly. I need our best soldiers to gather their weapons and prepare for battle. Alert the generals that there will be a briefing in the courtyard next to the armory in thirty minutes.”

From there, we rush home to shower and repack our bags.

“I’ve never been in a battle,” I say, looking over my few possessions and having no clue what’ll be useful. “Only witnessed a few from the sidelines.”

Diego pauses to examine my two sets of clothes and a box of granola bars before pressing a gentle kiss to my temple. “You’ll be with me, by my side the entire time. I’ve got you.”

I nod, and I believe that he’ll do everything in his power to keep me safe.

But I’ve also seen how destructive and deadly Andromeda can be. And now she has the support of the vampires, who also have the Blood Loom.

I'm not sure how they plan to use it, but if we don't stop them now...

The shudder I tried to stop overtakes my spine anyway.

"There's more to the loom than they let on," I say aloud, not bothering to face Diego because he's constantly moving.

"They said it amplified their magic, but it's more like its own power source.

I don't know how to explain it; I just know whatever they have planned, it'll be devastating to us all. "

"Ready?" Diego asks, stretching out his hand.

My feet are blistered, I'm bruised and sore from hiking for days, and we're about to enter a battle that has the potential to turn into full-out war. I'll never be ready.

But I take my husband's hand, letting him tow me out the door and down the front steps of his cabin.

Our cabin, even if I didn't get to stay long enough for it to feel that way.

Stop with the downer thoughts. You're acting like you'll never return.

I attempt to swallow past the lump in my throat three different times before giving up.

Then I'm standing in a courtyard with the alpha of the Bridgewater Pack, opposite Conall, Tyrese, the hugely pregnant Nissa who's surely not going into battle, and three burly werewolves I don't know.

Distrust laces every look aimed my way.

As much as I want to remain steady and claim what they think doesn't matter—hello, we're going to war!—it frays my nerves and leaves me on edge.

It's as if they're waiting for me to break free of Diego and set their homes ablaze.

Which is a bad example, because I did do that very thing, even if only in a vision.

But I'm here, joining their side, ready to help ensure that doesn't happen. Doesn't that count for something?

The generals appear to be having a facial hair competition, and while they'd all lose to Sasquatch, one of them has salt-and-pepper mutton chops, the other a long goatee that skims his protruding belly, and the third wears a beard so bushy it makes me think he wants people to know he's a werewolf.

They also all hate me already.

As Diego catches them up and details a plan, I'm the target of many glares and sneers—and as I learned the night of the ax throwing contest, these werewolves have excellent aim.

Mutton Chops mutters something under his breath about how a witch shouldn't be in a battle briefing, and the entire meeting comes to a screeching halt.

I flinch, preparing to remove myself for their comfort this time, but Diego's growl rumbles from beside me, his flashing gold eyes causing every wolf in attendance to bow their heads.

“She saved my life,” Diego says in a booming voice that echoes around us. “She pulled a sword out of my back and stayed by my side while the vampires offered her power and freedom. If it weren't for her, I'd be dead.”

I figured that would be enough to get the leers to stop, but Diego lifts our entwined fingers and kisses the back of my hand.

“Talia’s my mate. And yes, she’s a witch—a powerful one, willing to fight by our side. She doesn’t have to repress who she is. We need her for who she is.” Diego turns and looks at me now, as if we’re skipping through a meadow of flowers and have all the time in the world.

I’d look back at him forever if I could.

Then he says something that changes my entire world, something no one had ever said about me before. “I love her for who she is.”

My heart swells, almost too big for my chest. “You love me?”

I can’t help the vulnerability that comes along with the question, and the timing is absolute shit, but it’s the lighthouse in a storm I can cling to as we go head-to-head with Andromeda and the vampires.

“I know we didn’t get to do things the conventional way,” Diego says, lowering his voice to be more intimate, even though everyone in the vicinity will inevitably overhear—and likely be scowling.

“But I love you, Natalia. I choose you as my wife and my mate. I’d go to war for you a hundred times over. ”

CHAPTER THIRTY

A witch, thirty werewolves, and a veterinarian walk into a forest.

Once again, not a setup for a joke—just preparation for war against sixty vampires and two covens of witches, including my sadistic mother.

In other words, we're marching into this battle slightly outmanned. Definitely outmatched when it comes to magic, but as the only magic-user against twenty-five other witches, I'm doing my best not to think about that.

There are two troops in the Bridgewater Pack, both composed of thirty wolves, but they left one behind and under the charge of Nissa, to protect the compound and its civilians.

Kerrigan will remain back at camp to treat any injuries with the help of a werewolf named Sabine and her brother Justin, who'd transport the wounded, while the rest of us have only hours.

I'll never understand my mother taking her hatred of the werewolves to such extremes, but admittedly, it's nice, knowing I won't be immediately overpowered by brute force.

This time I'll have that on my side, but so will my mother.

Though the vampires will never wield the same pound-for-pound force, they have us beat in speed and agility. We'll be attacking during daylight for obvious reasons, but

something tells me the covens will have taken measures to counteract that vulnerability.

I'm also doing my best not to think about my sisters. While I always felt like an outsider and never truly connected with most of them, I'm not ready to deliver death blows for following my mother—for doing what I've done out of fear for most of my life.

At the same time, I never want to feel as helpless as when Riven forced me to hand over the loom—as when vampires took my weapon from me. That day, all I could do was stand there, my inner power failing me once again as vampires took my best defense against them away.

I keep beating myself up for not being stronger, but then I think of letting Diego die and wonder if there was ever actually a way to prevent a confrontation like this, with way more lives on the line.

Not without losing my soul, and while my mother bartered hers away long ago, I'm not ready to say goodbye to mine just yet.

Anyway, that's what I thought before I had that unsettling dream during our three hours of ragged, uneasy rest after setting up camp.

It started the same as it always did, with screaming and smoke and me standing in the center of it all, gleeful over committing such horrific acts.

But last night's dream was different. It started off the same, but it wasn't like when I was in the Hollow, being prodded and whispered at by disembodied voices.

No, this felt more like a memory. In it, I saw the real purpose of the loom. I saw what my power could do if I stopped holding back and used the loom to untap my full

potential.

More than a tool to amplify power, it siphoned its power from the shadow realm, amplifying whatever magic was already flowing through the wielder's veins.

If a witch as powerful as Andromeda got it...

"It's not just an amplifier," I'd told Diego as soon as I woke up. "My great-great-aunt made the loom from her mother's femur bones so that she could take her sisters with her to the other realms.

"Rather than be the adventure she hoped, it corrupted the sisters, leaving them hungry for more power." I wheezed as Diego finished cinching the belt with a dagger on either hip.

"Right before she died, she hid the Blood Loom away in the Hollow, imbuing it with the tie to the moon so it'd take a Realmweaver working with the werewolves to have a chance to remove it and access its power.

"I'm the firstborn with the power in a hundred years—that loom was always meant to be mine."

Diego had cupped my cheek and said, "That's why we're going to go get it back for you, baby."

But as our cavalcade reaches the fringes of the vampire camp, I don't feel so sure about our plan or even how necessary it is anymore.

Set up about a hundred yards from the house where I'd grown up at Oldenwilde headquarters, an enormous dome of the blackest clouds covers the area, blotting out

the sun's rays and casting us in a shroud of perma-darkness.

I've never seen such a powerful Overcaster Spell—Andromeda's effectively turned off the sun and surrounded herself with a vampire horde. Torches burn along the edges of the valley, topping off the medieval war vibes.

No surprise, they're ready for us, strapped with shields and swords and frothing at the mouth.

Okay, I can't see that last detail, but I know it's accurate. Point is, their scouts are just as good as ours, and they're ready and waiting for us.

As a battle cry goes up, the roar shakes the entire valley. Every muscle in my body locks, except whichever ones are causing my heart to beat so fucking hard in my chest.

You have to be strong enough this time .? You have to be the powerful Realmweaver and witch they claim you are.

Diego's hand wraps around mine, warm and sure and so much bigger than mine. "Stick close. Don't engage unless you see the loom. You call my name, I'll be there."

All of that sounds super impossible, but I nod and give his fingers a final squeeze.

He looks at Gideon and Elias, my two personal bodyguards. Poor guys have been tasked with keeping me safe in a place there's not going to be any.

I meet Diego's eyes, forcing my chin not to tremble, stinging tears held at bay. By the moon, I'm scared, though. So fucking scared I can't breathe.

"We've got this," he assures me, this reality of a war I was meant to prevent from

happening about to begin.

I plaster on a smile filled with the affection I have for him and these warrior werewolves who've joined my cause, grateful for and haunted by the cost of standing by me. "Whatever happens," I whisper, "I love you. I'd choose you as my groom in a thousand lifetimes."

"Right back at you, bruja." His grin is as strained as mine is, but much fiercer and so cocksure, it only makes me love him more. "Now let's kill these bloodsuckers and make sure we get to spend this lifetime together."

With the lift of his chin, he signals Conall and Sasquatch, who head the charge for the first wave.

They respectively command the two groups flanking our middle position, setting off a wave of shifting from human to wolf that ripples through our right and our left.

While Conall transforms to a russet-colored wolf, and I suspected Sasquatch would be a red wolf, the one-named werewolf doesn't shift. He simply hefts a giant battle ax and charges into the fray swinging.

After a quick kiss to the back of my hand, Diego releases it and shifts at my side.

One second my husband is flesh and blood, and the next, his storm-gray pelt is bristling, his gold eyes burning with deadly promise.

As I summon my limited magic without the help of the loom, I'm practically gargling my runaway heart.

The air goes tight, like a cold and hot front are about to collide and go supercell violent.

An entire crowd of vampires sprints directly toward us, gliding over the forest's undergrowth with silent, deadly grace. They move with the precision of predators, eyes black and cold, gleaming with their merciless intent.

Behind them, I catch a flash of movement—witches in ceremonial cloaks, fingers glowing in scintillating green.

I was always so jealous of my sisters who didn't have to work at their magic. Their stakes were far lower than mine, too, but it's like the harder I try to tap into the magic, the faster it runs away.

I catch a flash of Riven's cloak as they dance a defensive, slightly blurred line in front of the cluster of witches, rapier sword at the ready. Looks like the witches have their very own personal vampire guard. Did it really have to be Riven?

Andromeda stands at the center of their V-formation, the coven's homicidal, power-hungry leader always front and center.

A twisted smile plays across her blood-red lips, widening at the front lines of the werewolves and vampires who crash into each other with a clash of fur and metal.

Every single thing I've ever loved, she's taken away, and with the deaths of so many supernatural beings hanging in the balance, I can't believe she's waited all her life for this.

Once I spot the Blood Loom in her hands, my pulse quickens and my focus snaps tight.

I lift my chin, the tool's loss still a heavy stone in my chest.

If I had it in my hands now, I could feed it some blood and funnel every drop of my

power through it. Then I could pick apart the lacework of the universe that's pulsing before me, shaping the fibers into weapons with wicked blades that could cut down my enemies, one by one.

All I have is myself, however, and I do my best to assure myself that's good enough.

A vampire breaks ranks, charging straight at me, fangs bared.

I'm still attempting to remove a dagger from its scabbard when a blur of gray fur collides with it, Diego pinning the creature to the ground with two enormous paws and ripping out its throat with lethal efficiency.

Blood arcs through the air, spraying goopy blood the color of tar as two more vampires attack Diego from the other side with their swords.

I attempt to gather lifeforce and send a blast at the vampire warriors to help, but all I get from my fingertips is a blip of green light that instantly blinks out. My magic's a car engine that sputters instead of starts.

Diego clamps onto one of his attacker's arms with his teeth, stopping the swing of his blade. Using his hind leg, he launches a powerful kick into the other's gut, sending him flying through the air.

Conall intercepts him like they're playing vampire football, dragging him off toward the end zone with a snarl—as in a pile of vampire bodies that's being set aflame.

There are at least a dozen, but so many more to go, and several of our members are bloodied and applying pressure to deep gashes and ripped-off limbs.

Page 31

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:10 am

Sasquatch roars something in what sounds like an ancient, long-forgotten language, spinning his ax in a graceful, savage sweep that takes the head off one vampire before burying it in the chest of another.

He dislodges it with ease and continues cutting down vampires in a grisly line.

All around, the battle rages, a blood-drenched fever dream.

Diego wrestles a vampire the size of a boulder to the dirt, snapping its spine with a sickening crack. Conall and Sasquatch fight back-to-back, one all claws and teeth, the other a vicious ax and curses.

Power surges through the cluster of witches as they work in tandem, lighting up the sky with a spell that freezes the werewolves closest to them in their tracks—literally.

They drop to the ground stiff as boards, completely frozen and under a hex so concentrated, I'm afraid whether or not they'll survive it.

High Priestess Beatrix flicks her wrist at Diego as he charges the two covens, and I go icy cold, my gut twisting with dread.

His massive frame goes rigid, tendons straining against invisible shackles as he's rendered completely immobilized.

No, you can't have him! I won't lose the only person who's ever given a damn!

I gather every bit of lifeforce I can in a mad panic and slam my will outward with a

scream.

The witches rock on their heels, glancing around and searching for the source of the disturbance.

As disappointed as I am that they didn't fall on their asses, I use the distraction to wrap a gossamer cord around Diego's waist and tug.

Sweat beads my brow, but I manage to yank him back in my direction as I feed him a burst of raw magic—breaking the witches' spell and setting him free.

It's as if every werewolf head pivots to me at once, their respect invigorating me right when my knees threaten to buckle.

They might've hoped I was fighting by their side, but now they know it, and they renew their strikes with a whole new level of fury, cutting through the enemy faster than ever before.

Newly freed from his immobilized state, Diego lunges forward, slamming into the next wave of attackers.

Holy shit, we're actually going to win this!

But then I catch movement coming from the ravine to our right...

The world lurches sideways when I see they've hidden at least another fifty undead soldiers there, and all I can do is lock my knees and try not to fall with it. Massive and well-rested, they flow into the valley like an angry river.

Suddenly, what looked like a battlefield we were clearing and winning is filled with fresh vampire warriors, the odds not even close to our favor, and I thought we were

screwed before.

Andromeda cackles like the hateful bitch she is, her gaze finding mine through the melee. Her smug expression tells me she thinks she's won, and I'm spinning over how we didn't know those vampires were hidden there, even with my senses and those of the werewolves.

There's no time for that, though—not when what I need to be doing is changing up my entire strategy instead.

Our people start going down right and left, and I feel desperate to stop every injury and howl of pain.

I can't even think about death right now, and perhaps that's why I never made a good little soldier for my mother in the first place.

A cluster of vampires crashes through the front lines of the Bridgewater troops, tearing through fur and flesh in a bluster of fangs and honed steel.

The smell of coppery blood stings the air as crimson pools spread and stain the ground beneath the fallen.

I watch a werewolf go down, an arc of red arterial blood spraying through the air, and my stomach drops to my feet along with my waning hope.

I need the Loom, ?a desperate voice whispers inside me.? If I had it, I could borrow enough lifeforce from the living things in this valley and use it to crush them.

Riven twirls a silver dagger between their fingers, the blade gleaming orange in the glow of the torches. Emphatically bored, as usual, and obviously eager to sink their blade into flesh.

Until the traitor catches me starting.

They give me a slow, smug smile I'd like to punch right off their face. "I hate battles, don't you? So undignified," they say as though discussing the weather. "Though I do love a well-timed death."

"Is that a threat, or just a heads up about your next betrayal?" I narrow my eyes and march a steady trail in their direction, two mighty wolves growling at my side. "Or are you trying to flirt with me again? Because now's not really a good time, and I'm already happily taken."

A tumbling pair of fighters rolls through my path, nearly knocking me off it entirely, as the wolf and the vampire continue wrestling for control.

Another idea hits me, so delicious I'm almost afraid to toy with the idea—if I had the Blood Loom, I might be able to use the vampires' own lifeforce to crush them.

Squinting my eyes, I study the gossamer cobwebs that connect all the undead soldiers. While the wispy strings are weaker and not nearly as glowy, if I can just amplify my powers, I can tug on every single thread I can get my fingers on and do some serious damage.

My hands tremble as I hover them out in front of me, flattened palms facing the ground. As I concentrate on pulling, the golden threads from the plants beneath my feet begin whipping around me like angry serpents.

They grow bigger and dance wilder with my hatred, until they're more like jungle vines I could wrap around throats and squeeze until my enemies' oxygen runs out and their eyeballs go pop.

I panic at the amount of hatred I feel, afraid my spike in savagery means I'm turning

into someone I don't want to be—afraid I'm turning into my ruthless, murderous mother.

The shimmering vines around me shrivel and die along with every spark of magic I felt, leaving me feeling too weak and useless once again.

That's it. All this time I've been holding back so I don't become my mother, but it's what's going to lose us this fight.

“I have to accept who I am and step into my power,” I mutter under my breath, and Elias and Gideon turn to me with curious expressions before they're distracted by keeping up my bubble of safety.

But survival has always required acts of defiance.

And as much as society pretends otherwise, sometimes the only thing that defeats a bully is hitting back so hard they can't get up and hurt anyone else.

If I don't accept that I'm a witch who can take something as beautiful as lifeforce and turn it into a weapon to keep the innocent safe, I'm putting them at risk.

If I don't use it, my mother and the vampires win, and I lose everyone I care about.

And I care about all the werewolves, even the ones who glared and questioned me, because sometimes I've questioned myself too.

It's time to stand up and say enough already.

Strands of ethereal light wrap around me, reinforcing my limbs and my determination to not just fight, but win. I lift my hand, watching in awe as they curl softly around my wrist like a supportive brace, charging me up with electricity like I've been

plugged in.

And I suppose I have—I'm plugged into the Green Goddess and ultimate life force herself, Mother Earth.

There's just one more thing I have to do, something I've fantasized about a ridiculous amount through the most oppressive of years with her...

I'm going to have to fight my mother.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Mind made up, I tell Elias and Gideon they can either stay back or remain at my side, but I have to get closer to the witches and my mother.

I wish they would've chosen to stay back, despite the happy skip in my heart when they looked at each other and then me, only to declare they were coming with me.

While I'm undeniably scarier than usual, I can tell it's not out of fear but loyalty. Dare I say they might even...like me. "As soon as I get close enough to the witches, you pull back, you hear me?"

They neither confirm nor deny, but I don't have time to argue, so the three of us begin cutting our path.

And by the three of us, I did mean all three. Gideon and Elias have shifted to their human forms, picking up discarded weapons and proving themselves fierce warriors, but I'm able to hold my own as well.

I still want the loom, because what I can do still feels more like a novelty, but as I let my magic flow through my veins, I'm able to send blasts of energy and make blades to defend against attackers, forgetting until we're nearly there that I have an actual dagger at my side.

Not to sound like a little kid, but as I glance over my shoulder at how many vampires we took out, I totally want to yell, "Look, I helped!"

But then my mother and I are mere yards apart, the world holding its breath as we face each other.

Andromeda stands at the center of a tangled knot of witches, a few of whom I can tell are continuing to power and keep up the spell that's casting us in shadows and allowing the vampires to fight during the day.

She also has the Blood Loom clenched tightly in her grip, the blood-coated strings feeding the runes that pulse an ominous red. Several coven members fan out around her, their fingers crackling with magic they're using to hinder the werewolves and help the vampires.

A cruel smile curves my mother's lips, stained with a reddish maroon that now matches the macabre tool in her hands. Her eyes glitter with a destructive glee that makes me sick to my stomach. "Natalia, you made it."

I swallow hard, annoyed it's loud enough she and my coven sisters can hear it.

Fine, I'm fucking scared. I'd argue that anyone who's seen the number of deaths she's caused would be. If I were braver, I would've mentioned to Diego that I might've been there the night he lost everything—that I wasn't strong enough to fight for his family back then.

It's a mistake I won't make again.

If we both survive this—and I'm doing my best not to give in to my downer thoughts—I can at least promise him that.

My heartbeat slams against my ribcage as if it knows I'm about to do something so incredibly stupid and wants out before that happens. Not super encouraging, but I can't exactly blame the organ.

I nod to Elias and Gideon, who stand firm and fierce at my side. “Please,” I say. “I’ll be in more danger if I’m too focused on your safety, and like it or not, I will be.”

Ducking their heads like scolded puppies, they whimper as they retreat a few paces—not as much space as I’d like, but we’re both giving in a bit, so I decide not to push the issue.

I sweep my gaze over the battlefield for one last measure of courage, reminding me of what I’m fighting for.

Yes, I’m fighting for the greater good and the safety of the entire world.

But it’s the werewolves who’ve marched into war on my word, this fight will be dedicated to—now I just hope I don’t lose.

And as Diego stands up in half-form and rips a vampire into two so that I can have a chance to retrieve the loom, I no longer find the amalgamation of wolf and human terrifying.

It’s the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen, my man who constantly puts himself between me and death.

He’s a whirlwind of vengeance and fury, teeth bared as he rips through another vampire’s shoulder. Sasquatch spins his ax, blackish blood glinting on its blade, while Conall snarls, jaws clamped around a vampire’s middle.

The most important thing right now is that I know they all have my back, just like I know I’ve chosen the right side.

“Did I not say she was special?” Riven asks, squeeing and clapping their hands as if we’re at the matinee. “Try not to die, darling. I’ll be sad to see you go.”

I'm not sure if they're cheering for me or trying to get in my head, but there will be no dying for me today.

I pull in a sharp breath, willing my threads to calm. The golden strands around me swirl, reinforcing my muscles and bracing for action.

"You don't have to do this," I say to my mother, my voice shakier than I'd like but strong enough to be heard by every single witch in attendance.

See, I'm trying to think at them. We can stand up to her. If anyone wants to join me, this is your chance.

"You have power, you have followers," I continue. "Why do you need the Loom?"

Andromeda laughs, a dry, grating sound. "There's never enough power or followers, not when other species are physically stronger. Not until no one can ever threaten our existence again."

"You were the one burning their villages, Mother."

She scoffs. "I should've known you'd find your sense of loyalty the second I married you off to the dogs."

While I tried to fortify myself with all of the shitty things she'd said and done so I'd be strong enough to stand a chance against her, that stung, a sharp pang in my chest that refused to fade.

I blink at the tears blurring my eyes, telling myself I refuse to be embarrassed over shedding them, just like the many times growing up when she yelled at me for crying. "Why marry me off to produce an heir if you were just going to make a deal with the vampires?"

“Because I didn’t have the loom.”

I flinch, jaw locking. “But you tied Kerrigan's life to my conceiving.”

Andromeda shrugs a shoulder. “I don’t care if the veterinarian lives or dies.

I just knew the second you had a werewolf pup in your belly, you’d be able to gain entry to the Hollow—Riven was the one who assured me we could convince you to access it sooner that night in the forest after your wedding.

I struck my deal with them then, as the Blood Loom was always the goal. ”

My mother hugs it tighter to her chest, and I tell myself that’s not jealousy churning in my gut. Is it weird to think it’s at least better than fear?

At the wave of her hand, Riven and the rest of the witches back away, much like my two wolves did, and Andromeda lowers her voice.

“The vampires think it’s theirs, but they’re wrong.

And once they defeat the wolves”—this time she dips even quieter than a whisper, until it’s really more about reading her lips.

I’ll use it to control them. It was made by a witch for a witch. ”

“It was made for a Realmweaver—made for me.”

Andromeda tilts her head, letting me know she noticed my words had come out with a bite. “Ah, so you do feel the pull. You just might be my daughter after all.”

I stop thinking and reacting to her barbs and go on the attack. I whip up my hands,

golden threads erupting from my palms and slamming into Andromeda's face like a huge fist.

Her head wrenches back, and she stumbles a few feet, visibly stunned by my powers and the fact that I'd dare use them on her.

Not gonna lie, that was tremendously satisfying.

She wipes the blood that trickles from her nose, feeding it to the loom as we circle each other. Gripping the bone handles over the carved runes, she utters an incantation and raises a hand that glows green.

I brace myself the best I can as a wave of power slams into my chest, strong enough to send me sprawling across grass and soil.

Blood curses are one of my mother's specialties, and I definitely felt the supercharged punch of the loom.

I should've realized before that's another reason she'd be drawn to that particular weapon.

I bet it's how she sent out that blast that froze so many werewolves at once, manipulating their blood and combining it with a binding hex strengthened by the shared focus of the other witches.

"It'll never be enough, no matter how much power you gain," I say as I push to my feet, well aware I'm wasting my breath but unable to help myself anyway—she is my mother after all, regardless of rarely ever acting like one.

"You don't have to do this. Hand over the Blood Loom, and we can continue on with the alliance we made with my marriage. "

“Spoken like the weakling you are,” Andromeda says. “You can’t see the big picture—you never could.”

“I’m not weak,” I spit, straightening to my full height and lifting my chin. “I just never wanted to become like you—a witch supremacist who’s willing to murder children in their beds. Someone who uses cruelty and calls it power.”

Andromeda simply raises an eyebrow, the pursing of her lips conveying her habitual disappointment. “That’s why you’ll always fail. Magic isn’t meant for the meek.”

As if to prove her point, she slices her palm with a small but wicked-looking dagger. She lets the loom drink it in, then hurls a whip of something at me.

Her blood, I realize as it slices into my shoulder, leaving a puncture wound of pain that immediately blooms red.

She’s using her blood the way I do my lifeforce, forming it into a weapon.

Shit. How am I ever going to defeat her when she has the tool I need in her possession?

You’re going to have to take it back.

Gritting my teeth with resolve, I snarl and swing a chain of braided threads in return, forming another kusarigama and launching the scythe at her torso.

Andromeda dodges, the blade just kissing her gut. It sends her into the cluster of witches with their faces turned to the sky, and for a moment, the tiniest sips of sunlight leak through.

Vampires hiss and yelp in pain around us, allowing the werewolves a fraction of a

second to get in an unguarded hit before it's dark once again.

Page 33

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:10 am

Andromeda recovers faster, sending another shard of blood through my opposite shoulder. She's not looking to kill me, she's just doing what she's always done—hurt me. Physically and emotionally, as she tries to carve a legacy I don't want into my bones.

I throw out my arm and the thin crimson blade shatters, the pieces falling to the ground where they glitter, the sanguine color now dripping down my arm.

Andromeda flings a dozen tiny daggers of blood at me, but this time I'm ready, throwing up a golden pane the sharp tips bounce off and break against.

Holding my shield takes an inordinate amount of energy, and the muscles in my shoulders scream with the exertion. So I dig even deeper, tapping into my reserves as I charge forward with a roar.

My mother's forming herself a rapier sword of blood, long and slender with a hilt that twists around her hand and wrist.

I rush her before she can raise it, barreling into her hard enough, we go tumbling. It breaks the sword and my shield and the ground trembles under the intensity of our popping magic and flying fists.

We both get to our feet in a flash, circling like wrestlers who'll later shake hands, though that certainly won't happen in our case.

Before she can feed the weapon any more of her blood, I bind up her feet with the grasses beneath them. Then I give my next strike all I've got, pivoting my weight and

sending my elbow right into her nose.

Cartilage crunches, the Loom dropping to the ground as she screams and whips up her hands to catch the scarlet gush.

I dive to the ground, scrambling on all fours, the object I desire finally within reach.

My fingers wrap around the bone handles of the Loom...

Andromeda stomps on my hand and then kicks me square in the face, her shoe slamming into my nose so hard I taste the coppery tang of blood.

It fills my mouth and my throat, and I roll away from her, going on hands and knees as I cough up a mess of ichor and gore. My eyes water and bile burns my throat, threatening to come back up as I struggle to regain my bearings.

If only I hadn't sent Gideon and Elias away.

I'm sure they have their hands full. I keep trying to signal the werewolves to let them know if they'll take out Riven and that cluster of witches holding the Overcaster Spell in place, we can win this fight it suddenly feels like we're very much losing.

But maybe I just feel that way because my mom kicked me in the face and I'm getting my ass kicked.

Hey, one could always hope.

It's not something I have much of when it comes to our odds, so I go the fake-it-till-you-make-it route, flinging out a gilded vine to wrap around her ankle and jerk her off-balance.

Her body slams the ground hard enough I'm sure it knocked the wind out of her—now if I could just catch my breath, I could take the loom from her.

Crouched in an all fours position, I half-lunge, half-crawl, but she's already moving, a charged whirlwind of magic circling her.

It beats at my skin and sends dirt and dried leaves into my eyes.

The bloodied loom hums, delighted at being used, and a primal, slightly feral type of envy churns through me.

I know it's dangerous how much I want it to be mine again, just like I know Andromeda will do the most horrendous things with it.

Considering she's used the magic she already has to murder entire communities, I trust my judgment way more than hers.

Frankly, I'm too scared to know what atrocities she'll commit with my loom.

It's why I marched these werewolves into war, and I consider it my job to stop her.

Blinking against the spinning column of dust and debris, I plant my feet and gather all the lifeforce I can, wishing there were more woodland creatures to lend me their strength.

As much as I wanted to use what little vitality the vampires have left against them, the flimsy puffs of threads snap and break at the slightest tug, so plants will have to do.

I reach out a little farther to find the towering oak tree in the front yard of the house where I grew up.

I spent hours in those branches, drawing and reading and hiding from my mother.

It's familiar and floods me with an extra warmth, until I'm a charged lightning rod, my teeth chattering with borrowed vitality.

Andromeda has reformed her rapier sword and is already advancing, the detritus circling her slowing my steps and pinging against my skin hard enough to leave welts.

Molten flaxen fibers wind themselves around my body and harden, forming glistening armor that effectively blocks the debris. I add another layer, stacking up all the times I felt helpless as she punished and struck me.

I'm furious and ashamed and righteously unhinged.

Every bit of me wants to end her—to wrap my glowing threads around her and squeeze until she feels what it's like to not be able to breathe.

My threads form vines again, this time with spindly, sharp thorns almost as long as my fingers.

But no, I am not her.

I let go of the hate and lean into my splintered grief over losing the idea of a mother as well as a sisterhood I felt welcomed by. I hold onto the balance and decide it's high time I exert my control.

“Enough,” I yell, my voice cracking like a whip through the space between us.

My vines wrap me in a protective cocoon, tingling like my skin's made of pure electricity.

I form a couple of long vines that look and act more like tentacles, calming down the length of the thorns before flinging them into the whirlwind of magic my mother's protected herself with.

As my golden tentacles wrap around her and squeeze, the cyclone slows and fades away as my mother loses her ability to wield.

She writhes and screeches, finding thorns that are still long enough to make their point, pun very much intended. Despite everything she's done, I'm glad I calmed them down to be slightly less brutal. My goal is to defeat her, not kill her.

And then I'll feed her to the wolves.

A grin plays across my face, even though I'm talking a very big game. It's just the first time I've gained the upper hand against her in anything ever.

I roll her to me like a top, locking my eyes with her as she struggles against my vines and swears again.

"The loom," I say, holding out my hand.

"I can't give it to you with these fucking vines around me," she says, and I guess that's fair, though my mother's never been fair to anyone else.

As soon as I get the weapon, I'll use it to stop the witches holding the Overcaster Spell.

I can't think about counting our losses or the amount of death and destruction on the battlefield—not right now.

Not until I finish securing our future. Tiny scratches cover my mother's arms from

the thorns, dried blood covers the space between her nose and upper lip, and she has a few scratches on her cheeks as well.

We're both a battered, gruesome sight, I'm sure.

I just want it to be over—to return to my home with the werewolves and never have to face her or her cold indifference again.

Andromeda keeps the sneer plastered on her face as she ever so slowly begins to lift the hand holding the Blood Loom.

It rattles like a weathervane in her hand, pointing to me, fervid in its desire to belong to me once again.

My throat goes dry, that overwhelming hunger rising up as I reach for the item I retrieved from the Hollow, another place I never hope to go again.

It'll be nice to close this awful chapter and start a new one.

Andromeda looks down, not at the tool she's relinquishing, but at my belly. "Hmm. Looks like you did get there."

I frown, confusion cutting through the rush of adrenaline.

Then I glance down, wondering how she could possibly know, or if she's lying to catch me off guard.

A faint, golden thread glimmers there, coming from my belly, a fluttering so impossibly delicate I hold my breath as I study it. I can't believe I didn't notice it before, but then again, I've been a bit busy.

I'm pregnant.

My free hand automatically goes to my belly, cradling a glorious future I not only get to choose, but also want more than I've ever wanted anything before.

"Too bad it was too late," Andromeda says, driving her dagger straight into my belly.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

I feel Talia's terror a moment before it spikes even higher.

It slams into me like a blow to the chest, causing a reverberating sense of dread that nearly drops me to my knees.

I whip my head toward the direction her fear is coming from, scanning the chaos of the battlefield with panic swelling in my throat.

My soldiers are bloodied, staggering, and barely clinging to consciousness. We've been fighting tooth and claw, taking out vampires and regenerating as much as we could before taking on more.

There were so many more.

But even with our thinning number of werewolves, I should've never let her out of my sight. It was too big a job for Elias and Gideon; I should've realized that.

Then I find her—my wife and my mate—locked in battle against the monster who birthed her.

My pulse races with an optimism I haven't felt since that second platoon of vampires charged over the ravine—Natalia has the Blood Loom in her hands. If she can use it to amplify her powers, maybe we can turn the tide yet.

I'd really rather not end my first battle as Alpha in surrender. It's not just pride,

though that's definitely at play. And since the vampires and witches don't believe in clemency, that means we'll have to flee.

Just like Conall and I had to do when we were boys.

Squinting my eyes, I catch the flash of a blade. The hilt is gripped in Andromeda's fist, and my heart ceases beating when I see the dagger protruding from Talia's belly.

Her mother pulls it out, revealing a wicked, serrated edge coated with fresh blood.

Talia's blood.

"No!" I roar, the sound tearing from my throat like a clap of thunder.

I sprint toward her as fast as I can, paws barely touching the gore-slicked ground as I cut down vampire after vampire. I'm a hurricane of fury and claws drenched in black ichor, my vision bathed red with rage.

As I near Sasquatch, I point in the direction I'm headed and shout, "It's Talia! I need to get to her now."

Thick, tar-colored blood coats his hands and his arms, enough that you can no longer see the steel of his blade. He's the best warrior I have, and he leaps into action instantly.

Swinging his massive ax with brutal precision, our resident Viking cuts a path I continue to run to the woman I love.

Blood arcs through the air like ink, vampire limbs littering the ground in Sasquatch's wake. Still, it's a fucking eternity before we reach Talia.

And as I take in her pallor and the blood streaming from the wound in her abdomen, I'm afraid we're too late. "Natalia!"

Andromeda rips the loom from her hands and holds it up to the river of bright red blood, a color that signifies a major artery's been struck.

I'm filled with a sinking sense of denial and despair as the loom gulps up the liquid, as thirsty and insatiable as a dying man in the desert.

I grit my jaw so hard my fangs pierce my muzzle. I'll rip that witch's head from her body and use it for a bowling ball for what she's done.

She lifts it in the air with a victorious cry as it begins throbbing with otherworldly light.

I reach Talia right as she drops to her knees, the golden vines dancing around her mere minutes ago recoiling like they've been wounded as well.

I catch her in my arms as she slumps over, too weak to hold herself up anymore. My eyes blur with the sting of tears as I cradle her against me, pressing my palm to her stomach in a futile attempt to apply enough pressure and hold her together.

Blood seeps into my shirt, warm and sticky, and if she dies on this battlefield, so will I.

Panic inundates my system as the golden tether that's connected us since our wedding flickers, a candle about to go out.

"Talia," I choke out. "Stay with me. Stay with me, baby."

She's everything I never knew I wanted and needed, this stubborn, sarcastic witch

who never backed down from a fight—at least not one that involved me.

The woman was basically exiled from her own people, sent to a community primed to distrust her, and yet she still carried herself with kindness and dignity.

I used to think love was for the weak, a distraction for men who were willing to set aside their power.

But I was wrong.

Keeping Talia safe, whether in this world or when she was off being a badass in other realms—caring for her and having someone love me for me—made me a hundred times more powerful. More powerful than I've ever been.

The day I challenged Conall for alpha I'd cursed my shitty luck. I didn't know that the fight would bring me something I wanted even more than leadership.

I didn't know that in that moment, I'd become the luckiest bastard in the world.

Because it brought me Talia.

Andromeda's voice cuts through the chaos, a venomous chanting that makes me want to stuff those words back down her throat, along with something sharp and pointy.

Setting Talia gently on the ground, I don't think, I attack.

I barrel into her, my head colliding with her shoulder as I pounce. It surprises her enough that the loom flies from her hands.

There's no time to celebrate, as she flings up a palm that glows green, and suddenly it's like my blood's forgotten how to pump through my body.

But then Andromeda's head jerks to the right, her eyes going wide.

Through the ice that's seized not only my veins, but is slowly spreading through my entire body, I follow her gaze with a sidelong glance.

Talia's dragged herself through dirt and mud, leaving behind a crimson trail that floods me with grief that hasn't fully hit yet, but still feels like a thousand tiny deaths.

Andromeda shrieks and lunges at her daughter, her split attention freeing me from whatever spell she put on me.

Hugging the loom tight, pinning it between her chest and the ground, Talia screams, "Please, I need you to help me."

I'm opening my mouth to ask her how, ready to do whatever she needs.

The air in the entire valley shifts, the ground rumbling beneath our feet. The constant cling and clang of metal stops as everyone has to focus on remaining upright.

While I've seen the hazy outlines of what Talia does with her magic before, this is different. It must be the amplification of the loom. Every tree, every plant, every blade of grass shimmers.

I blink my watering eyes, struggling to keep them open as she gathers the beams of churning, woven gold. They dance toward her like happy tornadoes, seemingly bending to her will.

There are a lot of dropped jaws, mine included.

Andromeda's as well, I notice with glee. There's genuine fear of her daughter in her eyes, and that's even sweeter.

Golden vines whip outward from Talia with renewed strength and force; the air around us shudders .

Vampires are beginning to retreat, unsure of what's happening.

Not that any of the werewolves know, we're just not fucking cowards.

Then it's Jack and the Beanstalk time as more vines explode near the cluster of witches that've remained in a protected pocket closer to the house. Their faces are all lifted to the sky, their gazes fixed on the clouds.

Ah, they must be casting the spell responsible for the dome of darkness.

Riven's in front of them, acting as guard and protector.

Assuming a defensive stance, the vampire advances in our direction.

Talia forms a web around the vampire, leaving them struggling against the golden fibers as if they're sticky. My bride spins a finger, and the threads instantly obey. They wind Riven round and round, their smug expression completely gone as they become a fly trapped in a web.

They're airborne in the next instant, the sticky clump hitting the trunk of the nearest tree hard enough the crunch echoes through the valley.

Stuck and fighting against their sticky restraints, Riven begins swearing up a storm, and I can't help the grin tugging my lips—they definitely had that coming.

But Talia doesn't linger, quickly turning her attention back on the witches.

She raises a thick vine in front of the cluster of them, and a few of them stop chanting

to gape up at it. With a flick of her wrist, Talia sends it into the six witches like a monstrous, gleaming backhand, and they go flying.

As their hold on the spell slips, light rushes to answer.

Beams of sunlight filter through, piercing the clouds like divine judgment.

Vampires hiss and scream, igniting where they stand.

Several try to outrun the sun, heading toward the tree line.

Then, poof, ash clouds the air, weapons clattering to the ground like a glorious chorus.

With a guttural yell, Talia swings her arm, sending her vines punching through the house where she grew up.

She just did to Andromeda's home what she's done to countless others.

Poetic justice tastes so sweet.

She?also just saved?all our asses.

Andromeda begins shrieking and throwing a fit, even attempting to fire a bolt of magic at her daughter.

But Talia, battered and blood-soaked, lifts her head with a proud defiance as the spell bounces off her illuminated body. "The loom's not yours. And I'll do whatever it takes to ensure you'll never use it again."

A blast of lifeforce slams into Andromeda, sending her rolling across the earth like a

tumbleweed.

All at once the blaze of light blinks out, like the last burst from a dying star.

I watch in horror as Talia's eyes roll back in her head and she crashes to the ground.

A mournful noise rips from the bottom of my soul as I drop to her side, so afraid I've lost her. "Baby, don't you dare leave me now. Think of the countless arguments we have yet to have."

I try to curl her to me but get a stinging warning.

I'm just not sure from what—my best guess is she's still charged from using all that power. My first instinct is to rip whatever's attempting to hold me back from her to shreds, which is going to be more difficult if I can't see it.

Not impossible, though.

I blow out my breath and do my best to apply logic when I want to howl, she's mine and I need her, okay?

Please don't take her away, too.

Page 35

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:10 am

I didn't realize how scared I was of that before it happened, and it can't be too late—it just fucking can't. Haven't I lost enough?

Hasn't she?

Strings of light begin to crawl across Talia like glittering spiders, weaving a glowing webbing over her body.

I thought it was bright before, when she was doing her thing with those crazy-thick vines, but I finally have to shut my watering eyes to avoid searing my retinas.

Once the red behind my eyelids fades, I stretch out my fingers, testing I'm not going to get fried, and then pulling her into my arms at long last.

The battlefield's gone eerily quiet, vampire ash still swirling through the air as my soldiers begin to regroup. To sort through the injured and weep over those we lost, a weight that hangs around my neck like a stone necklace.

Then I hear the most glorious sound ever—Talia's faint pulse, shallow and weak, but her heart is fighting to keep beating.

"Baby? Baby, can you hear me?" I press a gentle kiss to her forehead. "I failed you. I should've stuck by your side and kept you from getting hurt. And if you'll just come back to me, I promise never to do it again."

"Did I do it?" Her voice is a broken breath, but as her eyes flutter open, I give a choked cry of relief.

“You did. You beat your mother, took out the vampires, and saved us all.” I hug her closer, inhaling her hair and locking my arms around her extra tightly.

“You never failed me, Diego. You saved me. Marrying you and falling in love with you saved me in so many ways.”

Tears fill my eyes, and I don’t care who sees how much I love my wife. “You scared the shit out of me.” I pat her abdomen, growing ill at the sight of all the blood and searching for the wound I was afraid would never heal.

The lifeforce of the plants she loved so much had taken care of her in return—they’d healed a wound that modern medicine couldn’t have healed.

“I thought I’d lost you, and I wasn’t okay.” I lower my voice and brush my lips against hers in a gentle kiss. “I knew I’d never be okay again.”

She places her hand on the side of my face and gives me the most beautiful smile I’ve ever seen, dried blood and cracked lip and all. “I guess I’d better stay put, then.”

I huff a laugh that’s a hint on the maniacal side after the emotional rollercoaster.

The bond between us sparks again—no longer a golden thread, but a warm, pulsing rope, stronger than ever.

“Can I be honest with you, though?” she asks, and I quickly nod and hold my breath. “Our honeymoon kinda sucked. We might need a redo.”

I laugh, this time full-out, the knot in my chest easing. “Maybe one that doesn’t involve vampires or bloody battles? Definitely no almost dying—that’s a rule I’m making right now.”

“As long as it applies both ways,” Talia says with a laugh. “I’m thinking Mai Tais on the beach. Room service. No sleeping bags.” There’s a wicked tilt to her mouth as she adds, “Well, maybe one sleeping bag.”

The ground still seems to be humming beneath us, as if the moss and roots are reaching for Talia the way I do.

Another sound filters through, and I could swear it’s a heartbeat.

Small and fast and coming from...her belly.

“I feel him,” she whispers, placing her hand there. “The baby.”

Green eyes lift to mine, glowing with a nervous excitement.

“We’re having a baby?” I ask, and she nods and tears up a little.

Kerrigan’s life is safe; we’ve won the battle against the witches and vamps and survived; we’re having a baby.

We’ll return to the compound to recover and rebuild, and that’ll include growing our family. I’m so happy I can’t speak, so I kiss her, stroking my tongue over hers and lingering for a moment now that I’m sure she’s okay,

Shouts come from beside us, a flurry of movement as Andromeda has broken free of her shackles with a spell.

I leap to my feet, Talia in my arms. Get Andromeda or get my bride far, far away?

A split forms in the fabric of the universe next to her, like when Talia peels back the layers to enter the Hollow. It feels the same, that dark and dreariness that makes it

seem like you'll never be happy again.

“Go ahead and keep the Blood Loom, I have need of it no more,” Andromeda says with a cackle that makes me wish I'd killed her instead of having some of my men detain her.

I just wasn't quite sure how my mate would feel, not just today, but future Talia too.

“It was also a key, one that siphoned power directly from the Hollow.”

Talia and I exchange a confused glance, dread forming a brick wall in my chest.

“I was afraid it didn't work—that I didn't feed the loom enough blood to feed her.” That lady is entirely too delighted for someone surrounded by werewolves, and it's beginning to worry me. “See, the siphon works both ways.”

I guess that's my cue to send Talia off with Sasquatch and get to fighting bad guys again. At least we're down to one sadistic witch, as the rest have run away.

“But she's awakened, and she's coming,” Andromeda hisses, and Talia shivers in my arms.

At the shift in atmosphere, my muscles tense.

A woman steps out of the fissure, radiating menace and an ancient magic that nips at my skin. She's pale as a vampire, all elegance and deceit. Her black hair tumbles over her shoulder, and her eyes glint violently, primordial and amused, like she already knows how this ends.

Sasquatch goes stone still beside me, gripping the handle of the ax so hard it splinters. “You,” he bellows, his wrath a serpent ready to strike.

“It’s been a long time,” she rasps. “Where’s your little bird?”

Sasquatch hurtles himself through the air, what’s left of his now-stumpy ax in his hands.

Both she and Andromeda disappear in a flash of green smoke, reminding me of the strange sigils we saw right before Conall was shot full of silver bullets and members of our pack stopped healing.

“Who was that?” I ask Sasquatch, who’s still sneering and pacing and ripping at his hair.

“She’s a very powerful being who goes by the Shadow Mother,” he says, hatred dripping from every word. “She’s the one who cursed me half a century ago.”

Thank you for reading MY HEXED HONEYMOON!

If you haven’t read the other books in the Bridgewater Pack Series find more about them by clicking the link!

If hockey romances that make you laugh and swoon are your thing, read GETTING LUCKY NUMBER SEVEN about a shy chemistry nerd who’s sick of spending her weekends studying with her cat and wants to check items off her bucket list with her hockey-playing guy friend Beck—starting with mind-blowing sex!

(first chapter below)

For fans of alpha billionaires who think they’re unavailable until they meet the heroine, check out my super steamy romantic comedies FOREPLAY WITH THE BOSS and MASTER DEBATER .

My boss is teaching me to be bolder in the boardroom...and the bedroom.

In order to take over my father's company, I'm going to have to put myself at the mercy of Jameson Stone, billionaire CEO of Craze Advertising.

He's as hard and immovable as his name implies and instructs me to demand what I want instead of constantly backing down.

It's something I've always struggled with—not only at work, but also in the bedroom.

There are things I want to try—steamy scenarios I've only read in my romance novels—but have been too afraid to request.

When my boldness lessons turn into foreplay lessons, it's nearly impossible not to fall for the man capable of making my wildest fantasies come true. But if I'm not careful, I'll end up losing everything I've worked for to a man who'll always choose business over me.

Check out the MEET CUTE SERIES , focused on modern dating and disastrous meet-cutes that go wrong before they go right.

BIG DICK ENERGY

LOVE'S A GLITCH

BANG BUDDIES WITH BENEFITS

MATCHMAKING: DOGGY STYLE

DOPPLEBANGER

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:10 am

Lyla

Ever notice that drunk people are, like, the worst whisperers ever? The guys were in the kitchen, getting more drinks and discussing my roommate's nice ass in what I'm sure they thought were hushed tones, while she and her friend, Kristen, were in the hallway behind me, whispering about condoms.

And I was sitting in the middle of the couch, feeling like I totally didn't belong, as usual.

I wished Einstein wasn't a scaredy-cat who'd taken off for my bedroom at the knock on the door.

At least then I could pull him onto my lap and keep my hands busy petting him, although I was pretty sure focusing on my adorable gray and white puffball wasn't the kind of thing I should do while on a first date.

When Whitney and Kristen had first burst into the apartment and told me we were going to have a group date tonight, I'd begged off. My research paper comparing generic and brand name drugs wasn't going to write itself. But then Whitney had made a compelling argument.

“Come on, Lyla, you haven't even been out, much less on a date, since your boyfriend dumped you two months ago. It's getting pathetic.”

I'd wanted to say that, one, the breakup was mutual and amicable, and two, I'd been out lots of times.

Not to parties, or clubs, or bars, or... Okay, so the past several weeks had gotten away from me, but they'd been spent studying, either here, the coffeeshop on campus—which was technically out, in my opinion—or the library.

Also out. I wasn't pathetic, I had a full course load, and if I didn't get stellar grades, I'd lose my scholarship.

But yeah, technically speaking, the dating side of my life was non-existent since Miles and I had broken up over Thanksgiving break, and I could see how that might be the tiniest bit pathetic.

“There are three of them, too,” Kristen had added. “It'd be super weird if you weren't here. Don't worry, we'll watch a movie or something, and it'll be totally chill. Nothing to be afraid of.”

Afraid—I really hated that word, mostly because it so often drove my decisions. Tried and true were highly preferable, but more and more, clinging to the familiar made me feel like I was stuck in a rut. Everyone had moved on and changed, including Miles, and I was still the same.

The three boys who showed up at our apartment were cute, although there didn't seem to be much going on between the ears or underneath the muscles.

Then again, since my brain had frozen up every time I tried to say anything to Colin, the guy I was supposed to be on a date with, I couldn't really talk.

Literally. I use the term “date” loosely, too, since so far there'd only been a lot of drinking with the other two couples cuddling and flirting and me doing the struggling-for-words thing.

I had nodding down to a science, though.

Kristin and Whitney erupted in giggles as they stuffed their pockets with condoms they'd retrieved from the bathroom, and then I heard Colin say, "Why'd I get stuck with the fugly, boring one?"

The smile I had plastered on my face turned to glass and cracked. I gripped the cell phone I'd just been checking my assignment to-do list on, the hard case digging into my skin.

"Be nice," one of the guys whispered at a drunken decibel level of stealthiness. "Maybe she'll let you get to second base. Who knows what she's hiding underneath all those clothes? Sometimes the quiet ones are the kinkiest."

Everything inside of me shriveled up and died, and I stared at the coffee table where my notebook and research articles still were, Colin's awful words echoing through my brain.

It wasn't the first time I'd been mocked about my clothes or called something less than flattering—"nerd" and "weirdo" had been faux-whispered under breaths as I was passed by in high school halls plenty of times.

For some stupid reason, I thought college would be different.

Wasn't this supposed to be where I met mature guys? Where people thought smart was sexy?

I nearly jumped when Colin sat next to me and offered me a cup. "Sure you don't want one?"

A lump rose in my throat, along with tears. Whitney and Kristen were already draped across their dates, tongue-action seconds from recommencing.

"No thanks." I looked down at my phone. "Oh, I'm getting a call. Guess I didn't

realize it's on silent. I really should get it." I held it up to my ear. "What? You need me to come get you? Where are?—"

My ringtone suddenly blared into my ear, and I dropped my phone.

It tumbled slowly, catching in the scarf around my neck for a moment before sliding down my long skirt and clattering against the floor.

It continued to vibrate against the hard wood, and I scrambled to pick it up.

Hardly anyone called me. I lifted it and stared at the display.

My mom.

Of course.

Heat flooded my face, and Colin was looking at me with his eyebrows scrunched. Actually, everyone was looking at me with pretty much the same expression.

"I guess the call dropped, but I didn't realize, so..." I lamely gestured at the phone. I couldn't answer and talk to my mom, and I couldn't stay here. "Anyway, I have to go. Sorry."

I grabbed my keys and rushed out the door.

The icy Boston air slapped me in the face, reminding me I should've grabbed my coat, but it was too late for that now.

As soon as I made it to the safety of my car, tears broke free.

It was bad enough to be called fugly and boring, but I, Lyla Wilder, couldn't even make a smooth exit.

No, I had to go and take awkward to the next level.

Times like these were when I really missed having a boyfriend who was also slightly awkward.

Miles had made me feel normal, and when I was with him, it was easier to ignore insults and to keep from thinking about how few friends I had.

I understood why it'd been time to break up—long-distance was just too hard, especially when he and I were both slaves to our studies.

I thought about calling him now, just to have a friendly shoulder to cry on, but that'd only make missing him—and the way things used to be—worse.

I glanced at my apartment door on the second floor. Who knows how long they'll be up there? Knowing my roommate and her equally boy-crazy friend, it'd be a while. No way can I go back inside tonight.

Maybe not ever.

Ugh. I am pathetic.

More tears blurred my eyes as I fired up my car and cranked the heater to high. There was only one place I could think of going. I knew it was a long shot that he'd even be home on a Saturday night. And if he were, there was even less of a chance he was alone.

That was the downside of having a friend who also happened to be a hot, man-whore hockey player.