



The Alpha's Contract

(Contract by Alpha's #3)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Accidentally killing her own parents is what turned Neah's life upside down. As punishment for her crimes, her wolf abilities were bound and was forced into a life of slavery by her brother. At the age of twenty-two, she saw no way of getting out and had given up on life, just trying to make it through each day. A contract between packs brings the arrival of the powerful, crimson-eyed Alpha Dane. A wolf that was feared by men, yet Neah couldn't help but be fascinated by him.

Adding Neah to the contract was never Alpha Danes's plan. There was just something about her strange scent that lured him in and he knew he couldn't leave her behind, especially not when he heard the lies coming from her brother's mouth. But meeting Neah was just the beginning. If Alpha Dane isn't being challenged by her, then it was her old pack that was trying to make life extremely difficult for him by keeping secrets buried. Werewolves & Shifters, Fantasy Romance and Forbidden Love....

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Raven

Crap. Crap. Crap.

My feet pace back and forth along the hospital corridor. As usual, the place is eerily quiet, giving me too much time to think.

"Will you relax?" My wolf, Midnight, huffs in exasperation.

"Relax? I'm mated to a Lycan! How am I supposed to stay calm?"

"Neah is a Lycan."

"She's different. I trust her. But this guy? He's friends with Mallory. That alone is a red flag. And look at the rest of them—they're all insufferable! We're caught in some kind of Moon Goddess nonsense!"

Midnight chuckles at my frustration. I rarely let anyone see how much I panicked on the inside, but thankfully, she was clever enough to help me appear composed.

"We could talk to her," Midnight suggests.

"Mallory? Absolutely not. That would make it look like we're not on Neah's side. And I've already made it crystal clear that she's not welcome here."

"It might be our only chance to learn about our second-chance mate."

"And what if he's nothing like Salem? What if he's cruel? What if he hates us?"

"Then we deal with it when the time comes. The hospital is as dead as ever. Go find her!"

Stepping outside, I spot Neah and my brother engaged in what looks like a heated argument. Dane should know better—Neah was supposed to be resting.

"She's definitely become more assertive since getting pregnant," Midnight observes.

"Hormones and past trauma," I reply. "Dane better be ready because it's only going to get worse."

"Hey!"

Eric's voice startles me, making my heart jump. I need to start paying more attention instead of zoning out whenever I talk to Midnight.

"Eric," I exhale. "Do you need something?"

"Yeah, have you seen Klaus?"

I shake my head. "No, but he was with Neah for tutoring earlier, so..." I motion toward the arguing pair. "He's probably gone home by now."

"Got it," he nods.

Before he can walk away, I stop him. "Have you seen Mallory?"

He raises a brow. "She was at her house earlier."

"Her house?"

Eric nods. "Dane set her up with one."

That was unexpected. I still couldn't wrap my head around the fact that he brought her here after what she did to Neah. It wasn't like him.

Eric walks with me, pointing out which house is hers before heading off to find Klaus.

I stand at the door, hesitating. Three times, I knock. Three times, I turned to leave. Just as I'm about to give up and walk away for good, the door swings open.

Mallory glares at me. "What?" Her voice is sharp. "I've been watching you through the window since you got here. You've made it pretty clear you don't want me around, so why are you here? Ready to hurl insults at me? Tear me apart?"

I glance at her, realizing something. His scent is gone. She must have showered—his presence washed away along with the water.

"The man—the scent that was on you. Have you heard from him?"

Mallory's expression shifts, a knowing smirk curling her lips. "Now it makes sense. The questions about him. You're mated to him, aren't you? You caught his scent on me, and that's why you're here."

"Apparently," I mutter, clicking my tongue in annoyance.

"The last I heard, yes, he's still alive."

"He was hunting Lycans?"

She nods. "Rogues." Then she steps aside. "You want to come in and ask all these questions? I'm cooking, and I don't plan on burning my dinner for this conversation."

I glance around to make sure no one is watching. The last thing I need is for Neah to think I'm betraying her. I'm not here for Mallory—I just want to know more about my mate.

"Fine," I say, stepping inside.

She gestures toward the small kitchen table, pouring me a cup of coffee before sliding it over.

"Damien is my best friend," Mallory tells me. "We met a few months after he was turned. By then, I'd already been a Lycan for almost a year—a very lonely year."

"He was bitten too?"

"By the same monster that turned me," she mutters, bitterness lacing her words.

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Raven

"Damien is a good guy. He has a dark side, like all of us Lycans," Mallory says, her lips twisting into a half-smile. "It's strange, isn't it? Almost like only those with a troubled past get turned into Lycans."

She lets out a short laugh, but there's no humor in it. "Messed up, right?"

"You really believe that?" I ask, tilting my head.

"I saw that girl's arms—Jess, right? Kids don't do that to themselves unless they've been through something terrible," she replies, her voice quieter now.

"And you?" I prompt.

Mallory's expression hardens. "I watched my father stab my mother. Over and over, like he wasn't even human. And after I attacked your friend, all I could see was him in me. I became exactly what I feared. Exactly what Cassandra wanted me to become." She runs a hand through her blonde hair, frustration evident. "Cassandra never picked normal, happy people. She always went after the broken ones. The ones she knew could be twisted into something worse."

A sinking feeling settles in my gut. What about Damien? What was his past? Why did she choose him?

"And Damien?" I hesitate, almost afraid to ask.

"He never talks about it," she says, her tone final.

"Never?"

"Never," she confirms. "I know that's not the answer you were hoping for, but it's all I've got."

I stand, ready to leave, but pause at the door. "You should tell Dane and Neah what you just told me."

She lets out a bitter snort. "And you think that'll change how Neah sees me?"

"She has her own dark past," I say simply. "The difference is, she's pureblood—the last one left. She's spent her whole life surrounded by lies, so trusting people doesn't come easy for her."

"Well, that wasn't what I expected!" Midnight remarks as I walk back toward the pack house.

Neah and Dane are no longer outside arguing—most likely making up when she should be resting—but Jenson is sitting out front, looking thoughtful. Maybe he can give me some advice.

He glances up as I approach. "What were you doing at Mallory's?"

I drop down onto the seat beside him. "I'm mated to a Lycan too."

I don't have to look at him to know he's staring at me.

"Mallory?" He scoffs. "Didn't think you were into girls."

I roll my eyes. "Not Mallory. Someone named Damien. His scent was on her. You've met him, right?"

Jenson nods.

"And?"

"I don't know what you want me to say, sis," he replies. "He's tall—maybe a little taller than Dane. Covered in tattoos. Kind of standoffish, but he seems to care about Mallory. Are you sure he's your mate? Because I would've sworn those two were a thing."

"Yes, I'm sure," I say firmly.

"Then I feel sorry for you," he says bluntly. "Knowing who he is and never getting the chance to meet him? That's rough."

"Wow, thanks for the encouragement," I mutter sarcastically.

Jenson smirks, but I shift the subject. "How's Jess?"

His expression darkens.

"Don't pretend you don't care," I press. "The second you heard she was missing you went after her."

"She's fine," he grumbles. "Locked herself in her room."

After a beat of silence, he exhales. "Do you think the Moon Goddess is messing with us?"

I chuckle. "You, maybe."

He ignores my jab. "It's weird, right? All three of us being mated to Lycans?"

"Funny thing is, I said the same thing to Neah. If Jess and Damien were never turned, we never would've been bonded to them. Does that mean we were destined to be alone? Or were we always meant to be mated to Lycans?"

Jenson shrugs. "You know me—I would've been fine without a mate."

I roll my eyes. "How you've managed to stay alive is beyond me."

He stands, giving me a pat on the back. "Love you too, sis."

Then he walks off, leaving me alone.

I sit there for a while, watching the pack move about, going about their lives without a second thought about me. If Dane weren't my brother, I wonder if anyone would even know I existed.

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Dane

Neah is curled against me, her cheek resting on my chest as my fingers trace lazy patterns down her back. The lingering scent of our passion still clings to the air, evidence of our inability to stay away from each other—even after an argument.

No matter how much she resisted, all it took was my lips on her mark to make her melt.

For once, her mind is silent. No overthinking, no analyzing—just peace. It feels like a rare moment, and I savor it.

Her lashes flutter against my skin, and her arms tighten around me. For a second, I think she's fallen asleep, but then she speaks.

"When will you kill Roan?" she murmurs.

"Soon," I reply. "After we've finished making him pay, he'll face trial."

My hand moves down to her stomach, feeling the small curve already beginning to form. A reminder that she carries our child.

Tilting her head back, she presses a kiss to my lips before guiding my hand lower, placing it between her thighs. The kiss deepens as I slide my fingers through her wetness, teasing her sensitive clit.

She gasps softly, her hips bucking into my touch. A moan escapes her as I quicken

my movements, pushing her closer to the edge.

A sudden knock at the door makes her freeze, letting out a startled squeak as she pulls the blankets up around us.

I don't stop. Instead, I slow my touch, keeping my fingers pressed against her, teasing, drawing out her pleasure. She glares at me, trying to hold back the sounds threatening to escape.

"Alpha," a deep voice calls from the other side of the door. "There's a man here. Says he knows you."

Neah tenses beneath me, her breath hitching as she fights to stay silent.

"Did he give a name?" I ask, continuing to toy with her, watching as she silently battles the orgasm building inside her.

"He says his name is Damien."

Her body betrays her, hips rocking against my hand, her teeth sinking into her bottom lip to stifle a moan. Her grip tightens around me as she squeezes her eyes shut, barely holding herself together.

"Keep him at the entrance," I instruct. "I'll be there soon."

As the footsteps fade, Neah finally lets go, a strangled moan slipping free as she shudders around my fingers.

"He's here," she mutters, trying to move away.

"He can wait," I growl. "I need to finish what I started."

I rip the blanket away, burying my face between her thighs, drinking in her taste as she gasps. My tongue flicks over her swollen clit, sending a shiver through her as I spread her legs wider.

She's mine. And I will always be the only one who gets to taste her this way.

As she writhes beneath me, on the verge of falling apart again, I thrust into her, her body immediately clenching around me.

"Dane," she breathes, eyes fluttering closed as I fill her completely.

I pull her upright, pressing her against my chest, my lips hovering inches from hers. With each deep thrust, I feel her tightening around me, her nails biting into my skin.

"Look at me," I command, voice low and rough. "Let me see those pretty blue eyes."

She obeys, locking onto me as pleasure overtakes her. A final cry escapes her lips as she shatters around me, her body trembling while I spill inside her.

She remains in my arms, her breathing ragged, her heartbeat racing against mine.

"You need a shower," I murmur, threading my fingers through her hair.

"Are you saying I smell?" she teases.

I chuckle. "Of us."

She wraps her legs around my waist as I carry her into the bathroom, her lips grazing along my jaw. Pregnancy has made her insatiable.

It's nearly two hours before I finally leave our room and make my way to the pack's

entrance. Damien is already there, caught in a heated argument with several of my guards.

The second he spots me, his expression darkens.

"Where the hell have you been?" he snaps.

I smirk. "My mate had needs."

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He rolls his eyes at me.

"I take it the Rogues are all dead if you're standing here?"

His dark eyes remain fixed on me, unreadable.

"It's fine," I tell the guard. "He's with Mallory."

Damien cocks his head slightly. "So the female Alpha hasn't killed her yet?"

"Not yet," I reply. "But that possibility is still very much on the table."

Damien exhales sharply. "Did she apologize like I told her to?"

"From what I heard, she said an apology would be meaningless."

"Classic Mallory," he mutters under his breath.

As we walk, he suddenly stops, his nostrils flaring. His sharp gaze scans the area, and at first, I think he's looking for Mallory. But then I follow his line of sight—he's locked onto my sister.

Raven, carrying something in her arms, immediately drops it when she realizes she's being watched. Without a word, she turns on her heel and strides away, her pace quickening.

"Wolf, right?" Damien murmurs.

"Yeah. That's Raven, my sister. She's never been a fan of Lycans."

"Who is?" he replies with a shrug.

"There are only four Lycans here—my mate, Jess, Mallory, and now you. Raven's close to my mate and gets along with Jess, but every other Lycan she's met has been a royal pain in the ass. Everyone else in this pack? Wolves."

"Got it." His dark eyes continue scanning as we approach the house where I set Mallory up.

Before Damien can even knock, the door flies open. Mallory flings herself at him, wrapping her arms around him.

"I'm so glad you're alive! But you shouldn't have come. Now that you're here, we need to leave," she urges.

"I haven't met the female Alpha yet," Damien responds, setting her back down. He glances at me expectantly.

"She's resting."

"I see." He pauses before suggesting, "Maybe a tour then?"

Mallory's eyes narrow. "Are you up to something? Because I don't have the time or patience for games right now."

Damien smirks. "If I were, those guards at the entrance wouldn't have kept me waiting. I probably could have taken out half your people in the time you were busy with your mate. Because that's the only reason you left me standing there so long, isn't it?"

"Damien!" Mallory snaps. "You can't talk to him like that. He's the pack leader."

Damien glances at her before giving a reluctant nod. "Fine. My apologies."

"Packs aren't how I learned to be a Lycan," he continues. "We didn't have a hierarchy."

"You may not have, but you sure acted like the one in charge," I point out. Even in the short time we spent together, he had taken control of everything.

He smirks. "I suppose so."

"Why do you want to meet Neah?" I press as Mallory disappears back into the house.

"You already said it, Dane. She's the last female Lycan Alpha. That makes her a target. She needs all the protection she can get."

"She has the pack."

Damien frowns. "Yes, but they aren't Lycans."

Something in his tone makes my stomach drop. "The Rogues... they're still alive, aren't they?"

"One got away," he admits.

"We'll track it down," I say firmly. I wasn't afraid of any beast.

Damien studies me for a moment before asking, "You've fought Lycans before, haven't you?"

"Yes."

"But you've never battled Rogues," he states. "They're different. Darker. More dangerous. They don't fight to win a battle—they fight for the thrill of it. They don't just kill they tear their prey apart. They drag bones and organs from living bodies, feeding while their victims beg for death."

I clench my fists. "How did you kill them?"

"Luck," Damien says bluntly. "But I've been watching them for years, learning their patterns. I've fed them and studied their behavior. They don't care about Wolves. They don't care about Lycans. They don't follow orders. The only thing that matters to them is a full stomach."

"You killed them in their sleep?"

He meets my gaze, unflinching. "I did what had to be done."

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Neah

Raven bursts through the bedroom door so forcefully that it nearly flies off the hinges. I've never seen her this flustered before. Her eyes are wide, her breath coming in ragged gasps like she just sprinted a mile.

She flails her hands in an attempt to steady herself, but it's clear she's rattled.

"I take it you're not, okay?" I murmur.

"He's here."

There's only one person she could mean. "You saw Damien?"

"Yes—wait, you already knew?" She stops mid-breath, staring at me.

"One of the guards interrupted to tell Dane. What's he like?"

"I didn't talk to him."

"Okay..."

"But he looked straight at me."

I sit up slightly. "Do you think he knows?"

"Of course, he knows, Neah! I panicked. I literally dropped everything and ran

straight here." She shakes her head, still pacing.

"With Salem, it was different. The moment I scented him, we gravitated toward each other naturally. He was doing the same, drawn to me just as much as I was to him. But Damien? He just stood there—staring at me, talking to Dane, like he couldn't even smell me! Or worse—maybe he did, and he was disgusted. He didn't look happy, that's for sure."

"Maybe he was just shocked. You've known about him being your mate for a while now, but this was the first moment he realized it. That's a lot to take in."

"You're not helping," she grumbles.

I can't stop the small laugh that escapes me.

Raven jabs a finger at me. "Don't! This isn't funny, Neah. Do you think it's because I'm a Wolf?"

"I don't know," I admit.

"It is, isn't it? He's probably repulsed."

"Where is he now?"

"I have no idea! I told you—I ran straight here. You're the only one who'd understand this."

I tilt my head, trying to calm her down. "What does he look like?"

She finally stops pacing and meets my gaze. "Like a god."

Then, just like that, all the tension drains from her as she collapses onto the bed next to me, giggling. "Do you think he'll like me?"

"I'm sure he will." Honestly, I can't imagine anyone not liking Raven.

She rolls onto her side, her expression darkening. "But he's Mallory's best friend."

"You spoke to her, didn't you?" I ask, already knowing the answer.

She hesitates before nodding. "I was curious about Damien, but... yeah."

"Do you believe she's sorry?" I whisper, staring at the ceiling.

Raven exhales slowly. "I want to say no, Neah. But when she talked about what she did, there was so much regret in her voice."

"You think I should hear her out?"

"Maybe. Listen to what she has to say and then decide for yourself," she shrugs. "If you still think she's lying, do what you need to do."

Raven stays with me for a few hours, the TV playing in the background, though our conversation keeps circling back to Damien.

"Raven," I sigh. "Just go talk to him."

"I can't. I've been sitting here for hours, and he hasn't even come looking for me."

"You're in my bedroom. In the packhouse. Do you really think he's just going to waltz in here to find you?"

Her eyes widen. "You're right!"

She leaps off the bed and rushes to the mirror, fixing her hair. "I can do this. I can seek him out. Women are just as powerful as men." She turns back to me, nerves flickering across her face. "But... what if he rejects me?"

"Then do what Jess did."

"Refuse?"

"Why not? It worked for her, didn't it?"

Raven nods, determination settling in her features before she hurries out the door.

'You should have told her,' Nyx murmurs in my mind.

'I'm fine,' I reply.

'Ignoring the pain doesn't mean you're fine.'

'I'm carrying twins. It's just uncomfortable, that's all.'

'Raven's a doctor!' Nyx presses.

'I know. But she's got enough on her plate with this mate bond situation. I'll be fine. I just need to eat something.'

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I swing my legs over the bed and push myself up, but the effort takes more out of me than I anticipated. Still, the moment I'm upright, I head toward the hallway, my mind now fixated on food. The hunger gnaws at me, making me realize just how starving I really am.

As I reach the stairs, a sudden weakness overtakes my legs. Before I can catch myself, my body gives out, sending me tumbling down the steps. My head strikes something hard, and everything fades into darkness.

A sharp ache jolts me awake. "Ow," I mutter, stretching out. My hands instinctively move between my thighs—no blood. Thank the gods. These pups are stronger than I gave them credit for.

A knock at the door pulls me from my thoughts.

"Come in," I call out from the floor.

The door swings open, and unfamiliar dark eyes meet mine. A hand reaches out, helping me up.

"Are you alright?" the man asks.

"You must be Damien," I mutter, eyeing the tattoos along his neck while rubbing the sore spot on my head. If I had a wound, it would have healed by now anyway.

"I am," he confirms, "though I didn't plan on meeting you like this. You should get checked out."

"I'm fine."

His gaze sharpens. "You're pregnant. I can smell it."

"I said I'll be fine," I repeat, my voice firmer.

He studies me for a moment before giving a slow nod. "Maybe so, but you should still see someone. You're the female Alpha."

I roll my eyes. "Is that why you're here? Looking for someone to lead you?"

"I'm looking for the only one who can lead us." His dark gaze doesn't waver. It reminds me of Dane, though something tells me this intensity has always been a part of Damien—even before he became what he is now. "And I want to offer you my protection."

Nyx scoffs in my head, and I nearly do the same. But Damien's expression is serious.

"Protection from what?" I ask.

"Whatever is coming."

My stomach tightens. "And what exactly is coming?"

He doesn't answer, just stares at me with that same unreadable expression. The same way Dane looked at me when we first met.

"And what about Raven?" I push.

"What about her?"

"She's your mate," I remind him.

"I'm aware."

"Are you planning to reject her?"

His jaw tenses. "I don't know her well enough to decide that yet."

So she hadn't gone to him like I suggested. Maybe I could force them together.

"Actually," I say, feigning hesitation, "can you take me to the hospital? Maybe I should get checked out."

Without argument, Damien walks with me. We stop just outside the hospital doors when he suddenly asks, "Is something wrong with Raven?" A frown creases on his face.

I shake my head. "No, she's the pack doctor."

His face remains impassive, but he follows me inside.

The moment we step in, Raven looks up—and immediately freezes.

"Neah..." Her voice trails off into a barely audible squeak, her eyes locked on Damien.

"I fell down the stairs," I explain quickly, trying to keep things moving. I describe the pain, and she gestures for me to come in for a scan. Damien follows, lingering near the doorway. Every so often, his dark eyes flick toward Raven, watching her closely. She, on the other hand, does everything in her power not to look at him. Her focus is so forced that beads of sweat start forming on her brow.

The sound of two steady heartbeats fills the room, just as Dane storms in. He brushes past Damien without a second glance, immediately pressing his lips to mine.

"Sorry," he mutters. "We were busy cutting off Roan's fingers. Are you okay?"

I nod.

"Tell Nyx to stop blocking me."

Before I can respond, Raven cuts in sharply. "She needs rest."

She turns her attention back to the scan. "Both boys have strong heartbeats, but this pregnancy is still high-risk," she warns. "You must take it easy. I'm not putting you on bed rest just yet, but if you push yourself too hard, I won't hesitate."

For the first time, Damien speaks to her directly. "Just out of curiosity, can you tell what they are?" His voice is measured, but there's something in the way he asks. "Wolves or Lycans?"

Raven's reply is clipped, her tone more abrupt than usual. "No."

I glance at her, taking in the way her jaw tightens. Was she irritated with him?

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Damien

From the moment I laid eyes on her, I knew she was different. My mate. A wolf. And yet, she deserved far better than someone like me.

I watch as she moves swiftly around the Alpha, her every step calculated and precise. She's quick, sharp, always thinking ahead.

Her dark hair is loosely tied back, stray strands escaping to brush against the nape of her neck. When her gaze meets mine, I catch the slightest fleck of light brown beneath her left pupil before she quickly looks away, turning her full attention back to the Alpha. A small smile tugs at her lips as the rhythmic sound of heartbeats fills the room.

That moment of joy causes her scent—ripe strawberries—to intensify, and for a brief second, I wonder if she would taste just as sweet.

Dane pushes past me, but I barely register his presence. My focus remains on her, watching the way her lips move as she scolds them both.

Once she gives the all-clear, I finally voice the question that has been lingering in my mind since I first detected Neah's pregnancy.

Raven's reaction is instant—daggers in her glare as if I've committed some unforgivable crime. Her response is sharp, and curt. "No."

Dane's unusual red eyes flick toward me, and I recall what he mentioned

earlier—Raven isn't particularly fond of Lycans. Maybe the idea of being mated to one disgusts her.

Without another word, I step out of the room, giving them space. But I don't leave entirely. Instead, I take up a position just outside, standing guard. Whether she acknowledges it or not, protecting the Alpha is my duty.

Dane steps out a few moments later, closing the door behind him. "The question you asked—it's been brought up repeatedly by the bastard rotting in my dungeon. That's why she snapped at you."

I exhale through my nose. "Didn't mean anything by it." I'm not the kind of man who apologizes easily, but I need him to understand—it was just curiosity. If I don't reject Raven, those pups will be my nephews. My family.

"The prisoner... he's the one after the pups?" I ask.

Dane gives a slow nod. "He's also the one who had Jess taken from the house. And his brother? The one you left for the Rogues."

"Right."

Dane's expression softens just a fraction. "Thanks for convincing Neah to get checked out," he mutters. "Just give my sister some time—she was rejected by her first mate."

That surprises me. "You knew?" I had planned to keep that fact quiet, at least until I figured out whether Raven and I could even make this work.

Dane smirks. "She's my sister. Of course, I knew." He claps a hand against my back. "Like I said—just give her time."

Her first mate was a fool for rejecting her.

As Dane steps back inside, Raven exits, taking his place in front of me. Her dark eyes lock onto mine, studying me intently before they flick down my frame.

"You want to protect Neah?" Her voice is quiet, but there's an edge to it.

"Yes."

"Why?" She raises an eyebrow, her lips pressing into a thin line. "She has Dane. She has the entire pack."

"She's our lifeline. The last pureblood."

Raven crosses her arms, her brow creasing in thought before she exhales heavily. "If you're planning to reject me, just get it over with. I have work to do."

I say nothing, simply watching her.

Her irritation grows with each passing second of silence, fury sparking in her gaze.

"Fucking Lycans," she growls before spinning on her heel and storming off.

I glance back toward the Alpha, then decide to follow Raven instead.

She moves quickly across the grounds, disappearing into the forest. Do people here not tell anyone where they're going?

I keep my distance as I track her. She weaves between trees, dragging her fingers along the bark, marking them with her scent. It takes me a moment to realize she's doing it as a precaution—as if she expects something to happen.

"He's an asshole," she mutters to herself.

Then, softer, "No..."

I frown. Who the hell is she talking to? There's no one else here.

She reaches a stream, kicking off her boots and rolling up her jeans before stepping into the cool water. Her eyes glaze over as she continues her one-sided conversation, frustration lacing her words.

I listen, amused. She isn't linking the Alpha—only mates and other Lycans can do that. But whoever she's speaking to knows about our bond.

Who is it?

With her focus elsewhere, she doesn't notice me emerging from the trees—or the presence that lurks just beyond the clearing.

A twig snaps.

Her head jerks up, her eyes locking onto mine, but I haven't moved.

The sound didn't come from me.

"Raven," I say, my tone even. "Get out of the water and come to me."

She doesn't move, glaring defiantly.

"Now."

She hesitates, then turns her head slightly—just in time to see the bushes rustling

behind her.

Slowly, she backs toward me.

When she's close enough, I grab her shoulders, turning her to face me.

"Run," I tell her. "Find Dane."

For once, she listens.

She bolts just as the Rogue Lycan emerges.

It's hunched low to the ground, moving on all fours. The Rogues have adapted, using all their limbs to propel themselves faster, making them even deadlier.

Drool drips from its snarling mouth. Its claws dig into the dirt as it stalks closer.

It inhales deeply, scenting the air. "A whole pack of wolves," it sneers.

A cold realization settles over me. I should have warned Dane. The Rogues haven't just lost their ability to shift back—they've learned how to speak.

"You're not welcome here," I growl. "Leave now, or you'll end up like the others."

The Rogue chuckles, but it steps back into the shadows. Its heartbeat slows as it retreats, fading into the distance.

"Shit."

This one is the worst of them all.

It doesn't just kill—it savors the suffering of its victims, drawing out their pain for days. I've seen it firsthand.

Because I was the one who used to bring it food.

Footsteps pound through the forest, the scent of Raven reaching me before she does. She isn't alone—Dane and several others are right behind her.

Dane reaches me first, his red eyes scanning the area. "Where is it?"

"It backed off."

"You led it here?" he demands.

"Apparently."

"Why didn't you kill it?" A man with long dark hair steps forward.

I sigh. Only Mallory knows the truth, but they deserve to hear it now.

"Because," I admit, "he's my younger brother."

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Raven

Two days had passed since Damien revealed that the Rogue was—or had been—his brother. He hadn't elaborated on the matter, and more often than not, he was seen trailing Neah. Whether she welcomed his presence or not was another story.

His constant presence made it nearly impossible for me to spend time with her, especially when his scent kept distracting me.

Despite this, he had barely spoken to me. He would watch me whenever I was around, maintaining his distance as though I was some threat. The moment Eric or Dane showed up, he would vanish, retreating to Mallory's house.

"He's being ridiculous," Midnight muttered as I stepped into the packhouse.

"Tell me about it!" I replied, just as frustrated as she was.

"She's getting dressed," Dane grumbled in passing, frowning as he moved toward the front door. "Damien is standing outside her room."

"Are you seriously letting him guard her? We don't even know who he really is!" I challenged.

Dane sighed and rolled his eyes—the same exasperated look he had given me for years whenever he thought I was overreacting. It was maddening.

Turning to face me fully, he placed his hands on my shoulders. "Raven, talk to him.

He's your mate."

"I don't get why you're acting like this. I thought, of all people, you would hate this—especially after everything our pack has endured."

"Things change. He's not here for me; he's here to protect Neah." Dane ran a hand through his short hair.

"What if he's like Devon? What if this is all a setup, and you're just walking away, leaving him alone with her?"

"Just because he hasn't explained himself to you doesn't mean he hasn't explained himself to me," Dane said firmly.

"Oh? So he told you?" I asked, genuinely surprised.

"Out of respect for my position, yes. Now, go spend time with my mate before she has another hormone-fueled meltdown."

I frowned, but he simply shook his head and walked out the door.

Damien stood rigidly in front of Neah's door, his posture disciplined like that of a soldier. His hands were clasped together, his gaze fixed straight ahead. I tried to approach quietly, but his head turned toward me, his expression unreadable.

"I'm here to see Neah," I whispered, feeling like I had been caught doing something I shouldn't.

His stare made it seem as though I had just confessed to something far worse.

Without a word, he stepped aside, watching my every move.

My hand gripped the door handle, but before I entered, I turned to him. "Why are you treating me this way?"

His gaze didn't waver. "What way would that be?"

"Like I'm nothing—like I'm something you tossed aside without a second thought. I never asked for this! If you don't want me as your mate, just reject me and be done with it!"

A ghost of a smirk tugged at his lips, but it vanished just as quickly.

"Is this funny to you?" I snapped. "Do you even understand what this is doing to me? Your scent is everywhere, but you keep your distance like I don't exist! Do you even want me as your mate?"

My heart pounded as my frustration spilled out.

"You hate Lycans," he said flatly after a pause.

Heat crept up my cheeks. Who had told him that?

"Neah is a Lycan," I defended weakly. "She's my best friend."

"You should hate us," he murmured, stepping closer. "We are nothing like you. We are darkness. Cold. Monsters."

His face was mere inches from mine. His words were a warning, but I wasn't afraid. This was the closest he had been to me since his arrival, and I couldn't tell if he wanted to destroy me—or claim me.

But I knew exactly what I wanted.

"I'm not scared of you," I whispered, standing my ground.

"You should be."

I shook my head slightly.

Without warning, he shoved me against the wall, his body pressing into mine. His lips crashed against mine with raw intensity, a deep growl vibrating through his chest. His hands slid under my top, gripping my waist possessively. His knee pushed between my thighs, forcing me even closer to him.

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Raven

The moment Neah's voice echoed through the hall, Damien pulled away, as if nothing had just happened.

My heart pounded violently in my chest as he stepped into her room, leaving me breathless and frustrated in the hallway, his taste still lingering on my lips.

What the hell was that? Midnight gasped, equally annoyed.

I need to get out of here.

Backing away slowly, I reached the stairs, my vision blurring as tears threatened to spill.

"No, not happening," I muttered, shaking my head as I bolted down the staircase, wiping my eyes. Crying wasn't something I did, and I sure as hell wasn't going to start now.

Desperate for escape, I hurried across the grounds and entered the hospital—my sanctuary. The one place where I had control, where the pack depended on me.

Sinking down behind the station, I sat in silence, letting Midnight soothe me.

Why had I let myself get pulled into that moment? Why had I allowed the bond to cloud my judgment?

We can't help it, Midnight whispered. He stirs feelings we haven't felt in a long time.

He's not Salem.

No, he's not. Salem betrayed us. Midnight's voice was laced with bitterness, though she would never admit it outright.

Frustrated, I smacked my palm against the cold tile floor.

"Angry?" A deep voice rumbled from the other side of the station, freezing me in place.

I thought I was alone.

Yet, I couldn't smell another wolf. Which could only mean one thing.

Dane. I linked my brother immediately. It's here. In my hospital.

What are you talking about?

The Rogue. My voice trembled.

We're coming!

"I'd prefer if you came out," the voice continued, calm yet menacing. "I just want to talk."

We should shift, Midnight urged.

No, that'll trigger an attack.

Moving carefully, I rose to my feet, keeping my back to the creature. I had no weapons, nothing within reach that could do any real damage.

Turning slowly, my breath caught in my throat.

I hadn't gotten a clear look before, but now, standing in front of me, it was even worse than the Lycans we had fought. Damien had been right—they truly were monsters.

Its piercing gaze locked onto mine, nostrils flaring as it tilted its grotesque head. Dried blood clung to its jagged teeth and snout. Had it killed someone to get inside?

"You reek of the traitor," it growled.

I held its stare, refusing to blink, refusing to show fear. A part of me had believed Damien was lying when he said they could talk.

"How...how did you get in here?" My voice wavered. I always locked up when I left.

"Is that really what you'll be worrying about when you're dying, Raven?"

"You know my name?" I whispered, my eyes darting toward the door. Where was Dane? Where was anyone?

The creature let out a low, eerie chuckle. "Looking for someone? Your new mate? Your big brother? Maybe even the female Alpha?" It leaned forward, voice dripping with malice. "None of them can save you."

Keep him talking, Midnight advised. Buy yourself time.

"You've been watching me?" I asked, grasping at any distraction.

"If that's what makes you feel better," it sneered.

It hadn't moved since we started talking. Was it trying to intimidate me?

"Your eyes keep flicking to the door." Its voice was smug, its clawed fingers flexing.
"I assume you linked one of them."

Then, in a flash, it lunged.

Before I could react, it vaulted over the counter, grabbing me in a crushing grip.

A cloth pressed over my mouth.

I thrashed and fought with everything I had, but each breath I took made my limbs heavier. My strength faded my vision blurred.

This wasn't like fighting one of the turned ones, who attacked with reckless aggression. No—this one was precise, calculated. I knew exactly what I was going to do before I did it.

My body finally gave out, slumping against its solid chest.

"Time for sleep," it murmured.

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Damien

As I resumed my position outside Neah's bedroom door after checking on her, I noticed Raven was already gone.

I never should have kissed her. No matter how incredible she tasted, I had let my guard down. I couldn't bring myself to reject her—not yet. Maybe I didn't truly want to. But sooner or later, she would come to hate me.

Footsteps on the stairs pulled me from my thoughts. Mallory approached her expression tight before shifting into a tentative smile.

"Do you think she'll talk to me if you're here?" she asked, casting a hopeful glance at the door.

"Mallory, we've been over this," I sighed.

"Damien, I have to try."

"Nothing has changed," I reminded her. I wanted Neah to listen, but it had to be on her terms. I had learned that much about her. "And right now, she's not in the mood. If you go in there, she'll probably tear you apart on sight."

"Oh," Mallory muttered, leaning against the wall beside me. "Then how am I supposed to get her to listen?"

"You don't. You keep your head down. You follow every order given to you. You

show respect to everyone here. And maybe—just maybe—she'll recognize that you're trying. But right now, she's pregnant. If she senses even a hint of a threat, it'll be over for you."

Mallory let out a weary sigh.

"I told you this wouldn't be easy. Do you think you have trust issues? The Alpha's ability to trust is on an entirely different level."

She frowned. "She trusts you."

"No, she doesn't."

"Then why are you guarding her?"

"Because I want her to believe I mean what I say."

Mallory rolled her eyes. We had always seen the world differently. She expected people to accept her as she was. I had always known I had to earn my place. Human or not.

"You know as well as I do that her suffering didn't end after you almost killed her," I added.

Mallory stiffened. "Right."

She bobbed her head, quickly shifting the subject. "I still can't believe you told them the truth about him being your brother."

She hated speaking openly about her past, so I didn't push.

"If I want to stay here, I have to be honest with them."

"But you wouldn't have told them if he hadn't shown up, would you? And you haven't told them everything." Her gaze sharpened. "You won't be able to keep that secret forever. They'll figure it out."

She knew me too well. But I also knew she wouldn't say a word.

I hadn't liked Mallory when I first met her. But when two people go through the same hell, it's impossible not to form a bond. Now, I couldn't imagine life without her. She had pulled me through the worst of it—more than her share of suffering alongside the other Rogues.

She gave me a small, sad smile. "You fit right in here. Who would've thought you'd take to pack life?"

"You just needed time," I reminded her. "Wasn't that the first thing you told me when I found you?"

Mallory nodded. "True."

"Go back to the house. No point standing here with me."

"See you later?" she asked.

"Yeah."

"At least you and Jess like me," she muttered before turning away.

I watched her disappear down the stairs, leaving me alone once again. My thoughts drifted to Raven—how she hadn't flinched, hadn't backed down from me. There was

no fear in her eyes, only anger and frustration. Even when I had pushed her against the wall, it was as if she had expected it.

A sudden shout shattered my thoughts.

"Damien!"

Eric, Dane's Beta, came sprinting up the stairs, breathless.

"Dane needs you," he panted.

"Why?"

He shot a glance at Neah's door, lowering his voice.

"It's here. In the hospital. With Raven."

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Damien

A chill runs through me as he speaks her name. He was after her again.

"Dane and Klaus are already on their way, but you know him better than any of us," Eric says.

"Alpha Neah?" I murmur, torn between protecting her or going after my mate. This could be a diversion—a way to draw us away from what my brother wants.

"I'll handle Neah. Go," Eric offers.

"If it shows up here, link Dane. I'll be with him," I snap before bolting down the stairs and out of the house.

The hospital isn't far, but far enough that he could have already done something to her. By the time I arrive, Dane and Klaus are already searching.

"She's gone," Dane growls, his frustration palpable. "Whatever it did to her, she's out cold. I can't link her."

"We checked every room. No blood, no signs of a struggle. Even Raven's scent fades to nothing," Klaus reports grimly.

But I can still smell him.

Moving toward the small desk in the center of the room, I catch a faint

trace—strawberries laced with fear. She was here. Hiding.

"How long?" I mutter.

"For what?" Dane snaps.

"Between her linking you and you getting here—how long?"

"Just a few minutes. I came immediately. Why?"

Had she known it was in here? Is that why she was hiding?

I scan the room. He had been standing just on the other side of the desk, taunting her.

"He wouldn't have taken her through the front door. Too risky," I say.

"The back entrance has been locked since we had issues with the other Lycans," Klaus mutters. "It leads straight into the forest. There's no other way in."

"There's always a way," I counter.

"I'll link my men. We'll sweep the forest," Dane says.

"No," I snap.

His eyes flash. "She's my sister."

"And if you want her alive, you won't send more men. He's baiting me. If you flood the area with warriors, he'll kill her—and everyone else. I told you, they like to play with their food. But when faced with too many targets, they just slaughter everything in sight. And like you said, Dane—you can't scent him."

I push through the hospital, reaching the back door. Just as Klaus said, it's locked. No sign of forced entry.

Then, movement.

A curtain shifts by a closed window. My eyes narrow. Claw marks line the edges. A small gap where the frame wasn't properly refitted lets in a faint breeze.

"He came through the window," I realize.

"He dragged her through?" Dane demands, his fists clenching. "She would've fought."

"She's unconscious. You can't fight if you're out cold."

I ram my shoulder against the back door. The frame splinters on the second hit, the door crashing inward.

Stripping off my shirt, I feel my bones crack and shift. It's been too long since my last transformation.

"We're coming with you," Dane growls, yanking his shirt over his head. "This is my pack. My sister. You don't get to order me around!" His crimson eyes burn with fury.

I remove my belt and boots, meeting his gaze. He won't like what I'm about to reveal. I had hoped to keep it a secret longer than this.

"You can't track them," I say. "But I can."

Then, I shift.

Fully transformed into my Lycan form, I stretch my limbs, feeling the power ripple through me. Dropping onto all fours, I lower my snout to the ground.

His scent is still fresh. And beneath it, hers.

"I can still smell Raven," I growl. "Enough to find her."

"Then lead us," Dane insists. "You don't have to do this alone. That's not how we work!"

I let out a low, menacing growl.

"I can—because I was like him."

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Damien

They ignore me and shift anyway, despite the warning in my glare. Dane keeps his eyes locked on me, burning with unspoken questions—but those can wait.

For now, all that matters is finding her.

They manage to keep pace with me for a few minutes, but I'm faster—my body moving fluidly through the dense trees, barely making a sound as I track his scent. The familiar hints of strawberries hit my nose. She's still with him. He hasn't hidden or discarded her like his usual victims. This is a game to him—one he's destined to lose.

The trees thicken overhead, casting deep shadows despite the sun still hanging high in the sky. Here, among the darkness, he could be anywhere—watching, waiting, biding his time until the perfect moment to strike.

**

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