







# The Alpha's Forced Pregnant Mate (Silverfang Creek Wolves #4)

**Author:** *Layla Silver*

**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** The mate match ritual says I have to mate with the enemy Alpha. No questions asked.

He's the most loathed Alpha on the East Coast, notorious for his cruelty.

I'd rather die than let him claim me. But unfortunately, he has other plans.

He's going to have me one way or another. And knock me up good as well.

Once he's touched and smelled me, he thinks he has a right to me.

He plans to isolate me in his cabin until he can force me into the mating ceremony.

I watch him fight, and I hate how it turns me on.

He hunts me in the woods, and I don't stand a chance against him.

The magic of the ceremony is heavy in the air, making my body want him.

I'm so tired of running from him, he chases me so hard.

The witch inside of me is succumbing to his forceful touch.

The woman inside of me is submitting to his demanding alpha power.

Can the evil Alpha be the baby daddy I need?

The Silverfang Creek Wolves are mated in the old way: each eligible name is added to a stone pot and stirred with herbs and two red rose petals. After two hours, the petals surface with the names of the mates. No choice is involved. You can only accept.

**Total Pages (Source):** 25

## Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:40 am*

The woods outside of Athens, Georgia weren't like the ones I was more familiar with up north. There was an edge of swampiness about all of it, and the air hung heavy with humidity. I was thankful for my long-sleeved shirt and pants that protected me from the mosquitos, but I was melting alive.

My team of demon hunters—Keifer, Bruce, and Laura—didn't dare complain out loud, but I could tell that they were feeling miserable with the entire situation. We all pulled at our shirts and fanned ourselves as we trudged through the undergrowth, but there was no help for it. We had a job to do, and the possibility of catching a demon that had been involved in the Red Canine's attack was too important.

I didn't hold any specific loyalty to Danny and his pack, but I am loyal to my pack, the Silverfang Creek, and these demon attacks have linked the two packs whether we liked it or not. With one of our members, Naomi, mating with Alpha Danny, and the demon activity that had followed Naomi to Red Canine territory, it seemed like the Silverfang's demon problem was going to be the Red Canine's, too.

Danny's pack had done a damn good job defeating the demons that attacked them, but a few did get away. Usually, that would be bad news—we want to kill every bit of demon scum we can—but we have no idea why the demons are even attacking as often as they are. They seem particularly interested in my Alpha's wife, Faye, and her daughter Sienna, both of whom have witch blood.

If we can catch and question one of the demons before dispatching it, we could gain vital information that might change the tide of what feels like an upcoming war.

"Whitney," Bruce hissed, shaking me out of my thoughts. "Look."

I went quiet, trying to see what the other wolf was pointing at, but I smelled it before I saw it. The scent of sulfur wafted through the trees, and when I focused on it, I could see the dark, slumped-over shape at the bottom of the tree.

Bingo.

"Laura, you're with me. Everyone else stays back."

The demon had picked a good spot to hole up, and it was a battle to get through the thick bushes and sticky mud, but after a few long minutes, we finally made it to the sad creature. Some wolf had bashed the side of its head in, and it barely resembled the middle-aged man it must have possessed a long time ago.

It tried to shriek as I crouched in front of it, but the demon was weak, dying. "Get away, dogs. Let me die in peace."

"Good try," I responded, laying my spelled blade against its neck. The blade was as long as my forearm, and I had to work to keep it spelled, but it did the job well. "Tell me what I want to know and I'll give you a quick death instead of a slow one. Why do the demons want Faye and Sienna?"

The demon laughed, black blood spilling from the corner of its mouth. "You have no idea what's coming, do you? Once we have your witch, her pup, or both, our numbers will grow beyond what you can possibly imagine. Your pathetic packs will never survive. You won't survive. They will bring about the destruction of the world."

I pressed harder with the blade, the spell activating and burning the skin of the demon. "That's not what I asked. Why do they want the witches?"

It didn't answer, instead laughing harder and harder, until it was verging on hysteria. The sight unsettled me to my core, and I could hear Laura taking an involuntary step

backward behind me.

"You have no idea," it gasped, still chuckling. "It's been centuries in the making. You don't know what you've started. Your wolves will fall, the witches will fall, the entire world will fall."

I stood, ignoring the way the demon laughed as if he'd just cracked the most amusing joke in the world.

"What is he talking about? What's been centuries in the making?" Laura demanded.

"I have no idea," I replied, then quickly swiped the sword across the demon's throat. I barely even needed to apply any force, and I could almost see the exact moment its life drained away. It went from hysterical laughter to complete silence in the space of a heartbeat.

We both backed away and watched as the telltale 'pop!' came from the demon's body, and it was soon engulfed in flames. It would be totally consumed in seconds, and there was nothing else for us to gain from the monster.

The two wolves that had stayed back came running through the foliage at the sound of the 'pop', but stopped short when they saw that it was dead.

"Any idea what it was rambling about?" Bruce asked. The sandy brown-haired male was an older wolf, around fifty years old.

"None. Whatever the demons are up to, it all seems to revolve around Faye and Sienna. All the interest they showed in Naomi looks to have been a distraction and nothing more. We'll head back and talk to Faye," I answered.

My cell phone rang as soon as we turned and began trekking back the way we came,

and I almost laughed when I saw the name of the screen. Tapping on the screen, I held the device to my ear, a small smile tugging at my lips. "Faye. Were your witch senses tingling?"

She paused on the other end of the phone, bewildered. "...no? What do you mean?"

"We were just talking about you."

"Oh! How nice!" Faye chirped in a cheery tone. "Did you find a demon? Did you find anything?"

I stopped at a fallen tree, kicking at it before taking a seat. My team were all doing the same thing, wiping the sweat from their faces and pulling at the fabric of their clothing to let in a cool breeze.

"No, not exactly." I didn't want to say any more about it. "What did you want?"

"I've been calling your cell phone for two hours, why didn't you answer?"

Frowning, I checked my screen. Sure enough, Faye had tried to call me a dozen times before this, but my phone had been on silent for the hunt, and I hadn't felt the phone vibrate. "Well, we did find a demon, but it gave us basically no information. At least not anything that we didn't know before...except it said that their numbers would grow if they were able to get ahold of you or Sienna. So I was a little busy."

Faye hummed. "That's not good."

"I don't think I was in the habit of sugar-coating things with you. Sorry if that was blunt."

"Oh, Whitney, I've never accused you of sugar-coating. It's just that we might have a

new problem. How close are you to packland right now? Because it would be so much easier to talk to you face-to-face about all of this."

"I'm unfortunately still deep in the Georgia backwoods," I sighed. "What is it that you need to talk to me about?"

Faye sighed heavily and the phone was silent for a few long moments before she spoke again. "Just come home. I've been having these feelings about you, almost like premonitions, and I really think it's important that you get back to us."

Her words sent a little shiver up my spine, but I thought there was more to it than what she was saying. "Faye...what's really going on?"

"I'm not lying!" she insisted, before exhaling out of frustration. "Okay, look, don't hang up when I say this and please listen to all of it. We're doing a mate match ceremony soon, and ever since we finalized the plans for it I've been dreaming about you being there. I think it's really, really important that you're present, Whitney."

Unspoken words hung in the air, but Faye knew that saying them would be a step too far for me, 'It's important you're there because I think you're going to be matched with a mate'.

It upset me at first—Faye knows good and well that it's hopeless for me when it comes to finding a mate. My job is a nightmare for most male wolves—I have to leave my home quite often to hunt, a lot of my work is secretive, I spend time with other male wolves while we're hunting, and worst of all, it's ridiculously dangerous. No man wanted a mate that could die any day, leaving him and potentially a child behind.

And that was the other problem—children. I wasn't against the idea. Actually, the thought of being a mother filled me with a warm sort of joy, but I wouldn't want to



give up my job just because I was a mother. All of this put a big red X over me in most male wolves' minds, and I was a seriously undesirable mate candidate.

I'd accepted that long ago, and besides on nights when I have a few glasses of wine and feel sorry for myself, I'm mostly okay with being perpetually single.

What I wasn't okay with was being dragged to a mate match ceremony just to be disappointed. Even if Faye found my match, he was bound to be disappointed, too, and it would just be a bad time for everyone. Faye knows all of this, so why in the hell would she try to drag me to a ceremony after all this time?

"Faye," I groaned. "You know how I feel about all of that stuff."

"I know, I know. I wouldn't even ask except...the premonitions have been getting more and more frantic. I wake up with my heart racing, and the only thing I can think about is how you have to be at this match ceremony, Whitney. Please come. If you aren't matched then no harm, no foul, right? And if you are—"

"Stop right there," I interrupted. "We both know I won't be, and even if I was, the guy would run for the hills. But..." I trailed off, closing my eyes and blowing out a frustrated breath. "If you say it's important, I believe you. I'll rally the troops and head home."

I could practically hear the smile in her voice as Faye spoke. "Really?"

"Yeah. But don't say anything about a mate for me, okay? I know it's the purpose of the whole thing, and that's probably what's making you think I need to be there, but it's a moot point. There's not going to be any mate."

Faye's voice softened. "We can't be certain of that. There might be, you just can't see it yet."

"No, I know for a fact. It's fine. I'll be home tomorrow evening."

"Perfect. I'll run by your apartment and make sure you've got food in the fridge. And hey, be careful on the way back. Naomi warned me that Julian and his jerk followers are MIA, so who knows where they've set up their so-called 'pack'. I know you can handle yourself just fine but the less drama we have with them, the better."

Ugh. Julian and his new pack, the Reckless Stalkers, were the last thing I wanted to deal with. "I'll stick to the main roads driving home, don't worry."

We said our goodbyes and hung up, and I groaned, looking around at the tired expressions on the rest of my team's faces. I was feeling the same way, and I hadn't slept a wink last night because I had been so excited about the hunt. Now, though, my energy had drained away and left behind bone-deep exhaustion.

"Let's head back. We've done all we can for now."

They all perked up, and within seconds, we'd all stripped out of our clothing and shifted into wolf form. Running was a lot faster than walking, and it felt good to stretch all four of my legs after such a long day.

The trip back to our small, two-bedroom cabin took a little under an hour, and as we neared the front door, I slowed down to human speed and changed forms, grabbing my spare clothes out of the back of my Subaru. The rest of the group followed suit, and I led us up onto the porch.

"Everyone get some sleep," I told them, leaning against the door frame. "Tomorrow we're heading back home, so we need to get an early start."

The group said their goodnights before disappearing inside. I took a moment to stretch out my neck, feeling a few vertebrae pop back into place before sighing.

I was exhausted. We had been gone for almost a month, tracking all sorts of demons we'd heard about, but it was all for nothing. The information we got from the demon we found dying was next to useless, and Faye's insistence that I be at the mate match ceremony only frustrated me.

I didn't have time for men, or love, or the inevitable heartbreak that would follow. I wanted to go home, but not for a mate match ceremony.

But when I thought back on how serious Faye had sounded when she explained her dreams, the will to fight her request drained completely out of me. I trusted Faye more than almost anyone else outside of my team, and if she said her witchy powers were telling me to come home, who was I to argue?

After all, I was more familiar with magic than most...but that was my little secret to keep.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:40 am*

The electricity cut out for a second, and the bulbs in the dusty fan above me flickered. The sight made me want to tear the fucking thing out of the ceiling and smash it into a million pieces, but I resisted the urge.

I'm an Alpha now. I'm supposed to be in control of my base emotions and able to lead with decorum or whatever the hell Alphas were supposed to have. I had most of the other qualifications locked down—I was one hell of a fighter, I had the respect of the wolves following me, and I would do whatever was necessary to provide for my pack and keep them safe. It was just the finer points that I needed to work on.

And the shitty electricity in our current home wasn't helping my temper any.

The Reckless Stalkers were small; we were ten members strong, and hopefully growing soon. We were also brand new, a split pack stemming from the old Red Canines pack, led by that asshole Danny and his useless mate Naomi. A few other dissatisfied wolves from neighboring packs also joined us, and I hoped that once word got out about what sort of pack I was trying to lead, more would find us.

Unlike the Red Canines, I wouldn't change our pack to make it look more like the stuck-up Silverfangs or any other more 'successful' pack. We would hold our territory with strength, and make money any way we possibly could. Being brand new had its perks like that because I could shape my pack however I wanted.

But the downsides were bullshit, to put it lightly.

For one, we were broke. Thinking about my apartment back in Athens made me want to scream, but there was nothing I could do about it. I had managed to find us an old,

unused grouping of campground cabins situated in a horseshoe shape in a big clearing just outside of Augusta, Georgia, and our first big undertaking as a pack was making it livable.

The cabins were rough, but finally, we had most of them clean with working power and plumbing. The main building in the middle of the campgrounds still had holes in the roof and the floor, so that was the last thing to worry about, and we could live without it for now. The campground had been abandoned for years, and we were lucky to have it.

Unfortunately, establishing pack territory wasn't exactly cheap.

I paid off the previous owners to give us the land and the cabins, but we had no money for supplies, so my wolves were working around the clock to make it all function. For the first few days, we didn't even have running water or electricity. We had to buy a generator, and then get a plumber and electrician out to our shitty cabins to get things up and running.

Now that it was done, I was able to relax a little, but I couldn't help but feel the frustration gnawing at me. I had enough contacts left from my days running drugs and weapons with the Red Canines before Danny went soft, so I was able to find us work, but it just never felt like it was enough.

At least it was work I was good at. Hell, it even ran in my family. My folks were behind bars because they had been such prolific drug runners, bringing anything and everything they could across the Mexican border. I had been more of an inconvenience than anything to them, but luckily, the Canine's old Alpha, Peter, had a soft spot for bratty little kids. Even when Peter suggested my parents step back and get factory work or something less dangerous in order to take care of me, they refused.

So I lived with Peter and Danny, and the Alpha raised me alongside his son like I was his own. I barely even noticed when my parents went to prison because they had become nothing but shadows in my world years before.

I think that might have been the moment that Peter's mind about the Red Canines had started to change. Even back then, they were a rough, notorious, crime-soaked biker pack, and no one even questioned where the money to keep the pack running came from. But the birth rate had all but stalled, and I was one of the last kids born in the pack all those years ago. Peter couldn't wrap his head around my folks valuing the road over their kid, especially when kids were such a rarity.

I didn't like thinking that I had anything to do with the softening of my old pack. They were all my family, and it just felt wrong to think that I was even a little bit of the reason they became a bunch of yuppies and family men. But I knew it was true.

The old Red Canines would never have accepted their Alpha rolling over and changing everything just because he found a mate. But they weren't the old Red Canines anymore, and that's why the Reckless Stalkers came to be.

I leaned back in the camping chair that makes up part of my living room furniture and sighed, annoyed. None of this had to happen.

I didn't regret leaving. I knew I was right, that Danny was changing the pack so drastically that it was about to be a shell of its former self.

But I did regret all the shit that came after I left...regarding Naomi.

I'd made the plan in a hot-headed storm of anger, and that was my first mistake. All I could think about when I first left the Canines was forcing Danny to see how wrong he was. He needed to see that his mate was weak, and by relying on her he was weakening the pack as a whole. He refused to see it, and it drove some of his most

loyal wolves away.

But without being part of the pack, how could I possibly make him understand where I was coming from? The idea to poison Naomi had come to me, and while I knew it was risky as hell, I was pissed off enough to be impulsive. Stupidly impulsive.

If I had taken a few days to fine-tune the plan, I could have come up with something better. But I hadn't waited. Instead, I had tasked two of my wolves with the poisoning attack. I hadn't wanted Naomi permanently injured—I'm not a complete fucking monster, no matter what the rest of the world thinks of me now—but I wanted to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that Naomi was vulnerable and that having her around made the pack vulnerable in turn.

I was okay knocking her out, but Rick and Tanner had instead used fucking wolfsbane and nearly killed her. The thought made me nauseous. I had made my point, considering my wolves had managed to poison Naomi in her own bathroom right there in Danny's home, but the cost was not worth it.

Everyone was so sure I was a murderer now. I've killed before without regrets, but killing Danny's mate just to prove a point was more than I'd ever intended to do. She'd survived, but it was a near thing, and all my bridges were forever burnt.

I couldn't even tell anyone I didn't mean for her to be poisoned with wolfsbane, because the last thing a new Alpha should do is show hesitation, so I just had to live with it. Now, I was just doing what I had to do to protect myself and the pack. That was all.

"Julian?"

The soft knock at my front door pulled me out of my thoughts, and I sighed before standing up and walking over.

"Yeah, come in," I said, opening the door. My second-in-command, a rogue wolf named James, stepped inside and shut the door behind him. He looked worried, and I knew he was about to drop some bad news on me.

"What's wrong?"

"Naomi and Danny left their territory a little while ago."

Fuck. "How long ago?"

James shrugged. "I don't know, exactly. I talked to my cousin who is still with the Canines. I don't think he meant to tell me, and he shut down when I pushed for information."

Why in the hell would they be leaving when the demon threat was so bad? It was so irresponsible, so dangerous...and also not something I should be concerned about.

"Any idea where they're going?"

"My cousin mentioned that Hector called them out, so I'm assuming Silverfang Creek territory."

I nodded. That made sense, considering Hector was mated to Faye, the powerful Silverfang Creek pack witch. She was probably having premonitions and warning of some sort of attack.

I knew I should be concerned with building my pack and nothing more, but I couldn't shake the thoughts about the demon attacks. They had been skulking around Reckless Stalker territory, and I was curious what exactly was going on, especially if Hector had called Danny and Naomi out. The Canines were weak and ineffective, but Danny and Naomi were good fighters, and any information they brought back to Hector



could prove valuable.

The problem was, how could I get that information?

An idea struck me. It was risky, but the more I thought about it, the more I thought it was worth a shot. If it worked, I'd have the knowledge that Hector had, and maybe even something else to offer him.

The Silverfang Creek pack is full of families, and no matter how well those wolves can fight, they aren't going to want to put those families in danger. The Reckless Stalkers, on the other hand, had no families. If I offered them the protection of my pack to keep Silverfang wolves off the battlefield, I might be able to get what I needed out of Hector.

And what I needed was a witch.

Faye, Hector's mate, was one of the most powerful witches in the country. She had the connections I needed to find a witch willing to join an unproven pack like mine. Wolf witches were nearly impossible to find, but I'd be fine with a human witch. All I needed was someone with enough power to make their spells stick.

Faye had always been a little distant toward me, but if I could convince her that I was here to help, maybe she'd listen.

But would Hector?

I didn't know. Hector had never liked me, and now he hated me after the mess I made with Naomi. But I could make him see reason, I knew I could. And even if I couldn't, the fact was that if my pack could keep their families safe from the demon attacks, then it was worth a shot.

I looked over at James and nodded. "I'm going to go talk to Faye and Hector."

James's face twisted in confusion, and I was surprised. "But they hate you, Julian."

I shrugged. "Yeah, but we're all on the same side here. The demons are the problem, not me."

"But they're going to think you just want information."

"That's because I do." I paused, looking him over. "Look, I have a plan. I'm not going to explain it right now, but it's a good one. I know how to handle Hector and Faye, so you don't need to worry about that. I need you to keep everyone busy here while I'm gone. Do whatever work you can, and if we get word from my contacts about a job, I'll need you to handle it yourself."

James looked like he wanted to argue, but he stayed quiet for a moment before nodding. "Okay. If you say you have a plan, I trust you. Just...be careful, okay? We need you."

I nodded, feeling a little more confident. This plan was risky, but it had the potential to pay off big. I just had to stay focused and remember why I was doing this. The Reckless Stalkers needed a witch, and if I could offer up protection for Hector and Faye's pack in exchange for one, then so be it.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:40 am*

Faye had told me to arrive at noon. I made it at 12:05, with mud and demon blood on my boots, hoping beyond hope that somehow I would be able to get through the ceremony unseen.

It wasn't even that I thought I looked bad or anything—I knew that I looked good, just not in a way that was appreciated by the male wolves Faye seemed to think were my potential mates. They wanted a clean-cut, flower-smelling woman, not a bloody warrior. But I wasn't going to hide who I was.

My fighting clothes, which consisted of dark jeans and a dark tank top, weren't exactly the best outfit for meeting your future mate. I couldn't help that, though. My team and I had been tracking a small group of demons just outside the Silverfang Creek packlands. The demons had split up and we'd given chase. It was an impromptu hunt, but when we saw demon signs so close to packlands we had no choice but to seek them out.

I took on the larger group—three demons—and it had taken me longer than I thought it would to kill them. By the time I made it back to where I left Bruce, Laura, and Keifer, they had all finished their demons off and were waiting impatiently for me. I knew it was a bad look to show up to a ceremony when the Alpha's wife demanded I attend, but I was sure she'd understand when I explained.

My team, on the other hand, was not thrilled about disobeying Hector and Faye by delivering me late.

"They're going to be pissed," Bruce said as he fell into step beside me, hair blowing back from his face in the breeze.

I shrugged, glancing at him out of the corner of my eye. "It's not my fault demons got close to pack territory. You know what we have to do."

"Of course I do. But that doesn't mean we won't get in trouble for this."

"I'll deal with Hector when I see him," I said firmly. My packmates sighed in unison, but I ignored them. If I could explain to Hector why I was late, then he would understand. It was just that simple.

Laura fell into step next to Bruce. She had dark hair, dark eyes, and tan skin. She was pretty in a delicate way, and all the wolves in the pack treated her like a princess. She hated it and had taken up fighting to make everyone take her more seriously and see her as the threat that she really was. She was a natural, and even though she was tiny she was one of the best fighters I'd ever seen.

"They'll probably just punish you," she said to me. "It's not fair."

"Life isn't fair," I told her, forcing my voice to stay light. I didn't want her to see how upset I was by the fact that she might be right. Faye might have been my friend, but she was also the pack matriarch. She had responsibilities to uphold, and it wasn't a good idea to disobey her. But I was only five minutes late, surely it wasn't a big deal.

We made it to the meadow where the mate match ceremony was traditionally held, and I breathed a sigh of relief seeing that we weren't the last to arrive. I allowed myself to blend into the crowd of late-comers, and I was pretty sure Faye and Hector were too busy to notice me anyway.

I could see the Alpha and his mate hovering around her cauldron, and their special guests watching intently at their sides. Danny and Naomi had traveled all the way from Athens to attend the ceremony to see how it worked before it was implemented in the Red Canine pack. I laughed to myself, thinking about Saul running a mate

match ceremony—the male human witch was a different breed than Faye, tattooed and overly serious. He didn't exactly inspire romantic thoughts, and I had a hard time thinking about him fishing out rose petals from boiling water to announce new mates.

Faye, on the other hand, was a natural. I watched as she stirred her cauldron, talking to Naomi and Danny but keeping most of her attention on the match spell. Soon she would pull two petals from the liquid which would have the names of the new mates on them. Faye would read the names, the crowd would cheer for the lovers, and then everyone would disperse. Easy. And once it was done I could explain how close the demons were to the territory, and the bloody fight that had made me late. The sooner it was over, the better.

I glanced around the crowd, surprised at how many people were there. Of course everyone was curious about how the mate match ceremony worked, but it was still odd to see so many people gathered in one spot. Usually, people didn't leave their jobs unless they had to, but with Hector's announcement that the demons were getting closer and more organized, everyone had become restless.

It was a dangerous situation. Demons were already a huge threat to us. We were strong, but we didn't know how many demons were gathering, or if they were in any way organized. We had only been able to deal with small groups of demons attacking secluded areas and lone wolves.

This was something different. This was a demon army, and they were getting bolder. The last thing any of us needed was a war.

Faye stepped forward to speak. Her long hair was pulled back into a braid that reached the middle of her back and she wore jeans and a loose-fitting green blouse. She looked nothing like a witch, but she was powerful, and I'd seen her use her magic for some pretty incredible things.

"Everyone, please!" she called out, waving her hands in the air.

The crowd of wolves and humans fell silent. Hector stood behind her, his arms crossed over his chest, looking every inch the Alpha that he was.

"I know everyone is anxious," Faye said. "I can feel it. But our match ceremonies, our families, and our pups are the core of the Silverfang Creek pack. Our unity makes us strong, and we can't give that up just because of some demonic threat."

People shifted around me, but I stayed where I was. Faye looked up, searching the crowd, and I knew she was looking for me. I swallowed hard. Maybe Bruce was right. Maybe I was going to be punished for being late.

Faye's eyes landed on me and she raised an eyebrow, then gave a short nod of her head. I let out a breath I didn't know I'd been holding, relieved. She understood why I showed up looking like I had been rolling around in the dirt. Or at least she would, once I explained.

"Before I begin," Faye said, looking over the crowd again. "I want everyone to know that even the most unlikely sounding matches can work out. Case in point, Naomi and Danny here, who seemed impossible at first. Now look at them, totally in love and perfectly matched. The spell does not lie." Her gaze rested heavily on me. "Even if we don't like the results at first."

Naomi blushed and looked down, but I could see a smile on her face. Danny pulled her to his side and kissed her temple. I watched them with envy. Their love was so obvious, it was like they were almost glowing. I sighed. I wanted that. I always had. But how was I supposed to have a happily ever after when my mate could be any one of the wolves who had already decided I wasn't worth pursuing?

"Alright," Faye said, clapping her hands together. "Let's get started. The petals are

starting to rise to the surface."

She nodded to Hector, who walked over to stand next to her. He reached out and took her hand, squeezing it before letting go and taking a step back. "I know some of you are concerned about the demons that have been attacking us for the last few months," he said. "And I know some of you are afraid that you will be matched with someone outside of the pack. But the fates know best, and we will not allow the demons to break us."

Hector looked so strong and powerful at that moment. I knew the demons were a threat. I'd fought them many times in my life, and every time they got a little harder to defeat. Now that they seemed to be banding together into one massive army, they were dangerous. Hector had every right to be worried, but he was standing tall and proud, inspiring everyone in the pack to do the same.

My thoughts were interrupted when Faye let out a loud gasp, drawing my attention to her cauldron. She had reached inside and pulled two rose petals from the liquid. One of her hands was cupped around the petals, hiding them from view. I held my breath. Surely, surely she wasn't about to—

I watched Faye's throat bob as she swallowed hard, and her eyes flicked up to meet mine. Her pupils were pinpricks and her chest was rising and falling fast—she was stressed. Panicky, even.

"Who is it?" I asked, the words coming out in a harsh whisper. I wasn't even sure if Faye could hear me, but her eyes dropped down to the petals in her hand before looking back up at me. She shook her head slowly, and I could tell by the way her mouth turned down that whatever name was on those petals, it wasn't one that anyone wanted.

Hector stepped up next to his mate, and Faye looked at him. He placed a hand on her

back, rubbing it up and down in a comforting gesture, and nodded to her. She took a deep breath and squared her shoulders, looking back at the crowd.

"Whitney Gray," Faye said loudly, and the whole world stopped for a second. "And Julian Payne."

I blinked. My brain felt like it was short-circuiting. This couldn't be happening. There was no way I had heard right. But then Faye looked at me again, her face grim, and I knew. This was really happening.

There was a moment of silence and then everything exploded into noise. I could hear my name being called, and I turned to see Laura and Bruce pushing their way through the crowd. Keifer was right behind them, and when they reached me they pulled me into a group hug. I was surrounded on all sides by the scent of my packmates, and it should have comforted me, but it didn't. Nothing could help the panic rising in my chest.

"This can't be real," I said, pushing my way out of their embrace. "You know what kind of wolf Julian is. And you know that he's the enemy of two packs. How could we be mates?"

Keifer put his hands on my shoulders, steadying me. I hadn't realized until he touched me that I was shaking. I forced myself to look up at him, trying to take some sort of comfort in his steady presence.

"Just relax," he told me. "We'll figure this out."

Bruce shook his head. "No. There's nothing to figure out. Fuck Julian Payne "

Laura protested, "Faye said herself that even unlikely matches could work."



"If they wanted to." Bruce gave me a sympathetic look. "Whitney doesn't want a mate. You know that."

"This is different," Laura argued. "It's not like she's going to be forced to marry some guy who is creepy and old or something. She's going to be mated to Julian."

"Julian is a dick," Keifer said. I shot him a grateful look.

Laura threw her hands in the air. "Of course he's a dick! He's a villain, and everyone knows it. But Faye said the spell doesn't lie. They're mates. She has to accept that."

I shook my head slowly. I knew that Laura was right, but that didn't mean I had to like it. How could I be mated to a man who was the enemy of our pack?

"Accept it?" I parroted. "Are you forgetting that he poisoned Naomi? How can I just accept that he's my mate when he's so clearly a monster?"

Keifer nodded. "Yeah, Laura. I know you like Faye and want to believe that she's doing the right thing, but this isn't the right thing."

Laura turned to me, putting her hands on my shoulders. "Whitney, listen. I know you're mad. I get it. But there are ways to fix this. We can go talk to Faye. Explain what happened, and how you feel."

"I don't want to talk to Faye," I said, crossing my arms over my chest. I could feel a low-level growl beginning, and I forced myself to stop. Laura didn't deserve my anger. She was just trying to help. I took a deep breath, held it for a few seconds, then slowly let it out.

"Look, Laura. I know you mean well, but the truth is that this situation is fucked up. No, we don't have to accept the match."

"Uh, not to interrupt you two, but everyone is looking at us. Especially the Alphas." Keifer gave me a pointed look and I sighed, turning to see what he was talking about. Hector and Faye were indeed staring at our little group, and Faye looked worried. Hector, on the other hand, looked pissed. I winced, realizing that I might have made a big mistake in questioning Faye's matchmaking abilities.

But if Hector looked angry, Danny looked apoplectic. Naomi, on the other hand, had gone white, her hand resting at her throat in shock. I wondered what she was thinking. Everyone knew what Julian did to Naomi, and it must have shaken her to her core to hear his name read out loud just now.

I looked down, unable to face their accusing eyes any longer. Even though I was mad at Faye for putting me in this situation, I didn't want to make things worse.

Laura touched my arm. "You have to talk to them," she said gently. "I know you're mad, but they are going to be the ones to tell you what's going on. You might as well go get it over with."

I took a deep breath. Laura was right. The sooner I got this over with, the sooner I could start trying to figure out a way to get myself out of this mess. I nodded, but I still couldn't bring myself to look at anyone. I stared at the ground instead, and let Laura guide me through the crowd.

Faye and Hector stood together, talking to Naomi and Danny. They all looked up as we approached, and I stopped just short of reaching them. I swallowed hard, trying not to let my nerves show. I'd been in plenty of dangerous situations before, and I didn't know why this was any different. But I had a sinking feeling in my stomach, and I knew that nothing was going to be the same after today.

Naomi stepped forward, and I was surprised when she took my hands in hers. She gave me a weak smile, her eyes full of sadness.

"I'm so sorry about this," she said, looking over her shoulder at Faye. "I never meant for anything like this to happen. If we hadn't come up to see a mate match ceremony maybe—"

"It's not your fault," I told her, pulling my hands out of hers. "No one is to blame here except Julian. He's the one who has made himself an enemy."

"Enemy or no," Faye started, standing behind Naomi. "He's your mate."

"How can I be mated with someone I'm pretty sure all of you would kill on sight given the chance?" I asked. I knew that I was being rude, but I couldn't help it. This situation was messed up, and I didn't know what to do.

"He's not here," Hector growled, and when I looked at him, I realized that I read his expression wrong before. He wasn't mad that I had balked at Faye's spell. Instead, he was pissed for me, not at me. "And I have zero intention of putting one of my wolves in danger, Whitney. He's going to know you're his mate sooner than later, there's too many people here for it to be kept a secret. So let's go figure out a plan to keep you safe, and if we can't then we will get you out of here. You can go into hiding until this whole thing is sorted out."

I nodded, feeling a bit calmer now that I knew that Hector wasn't upset with me. But I wasn't sure if running away was the best answer. The demons were getting stronger, and from what I understood, the only way to break a mate bond was death. I had no intention of dying, which meant...

"Wait," I jerked my head to Danny, and then back to Hector. "Alphas, excuse my bluntness, but you're not planning to kill him are you?"

Hector and Danny shared a look, and then Hector spoke up, "That was the first idea. But Faye isn't so sure that will work. The mate bond is magic, and killing him may

not break it. We need to find out more about how it works because killing him might end up hurting you."

I put a hand on my forehead, feeling a little dizzy. "So if you can't kill him, then what?"

"You're going to have to be his mate," Hector said grimly. "If he dies, it could affect you. If he rejects the bond, it could affect you. We don't know how any of this works. And there's no guarantee that we'd find another way."

"So I'm stuck with him?" I asked, trying not to sound as disgusted by that thought as I felt.

Hector nodded slowly. "It's the only option we have at the moment. Unless you want me to get rid of him in a different way."

I thought about that for a moment. It would be so much easier if Julian just died and everything went back to normal. But then again, if something went wrong and our brand-new bond messed me up somehow, it would be a disaster. Fear rose in my throat at the idea. I didn't want to die, and I didn't want to end up messed up in the head either.

Plus, there was the fact that Julian is both an Alpha and Danny's ex-best friend. Something told me that as much as Danny hated Julian, he'd still be torn up if one of us ended him.

No. No matter how much I hated this whole situation, I knew it wasn't going to get any better if Julian died.

I shook my head. "No. No death. At least not yet." I exhaled, blowing a stray strand of hair off my face. My heart rate was slowing as the gears in my head started to turn.

"Okay. I won't fight the bond right now, but I'm also going to avoid Julian at all costs. I mean nothing will change, right? It's not like we've given each other the mating bite. If I have to spend the rest of my life staying out of his way, so be it. Anything is better than being his mate."

"And I'll try to see if I can find a way to get you out of the bond," Faye said, as quietly as she could while still being heard by our small grouping. "But don't breathe a word of that. I don't even know if it's possible, but the pack needs to keep believing in the power of the mate match ceremony. If they know there is a way to break the bond, a lot of that power will be lost."

"I understand." I gave Faye a quick nod of acknowledgment. She was putting herself on the line for me, and I knew it. "Thank you."

I could feel the crowd still staring at all of us, and I had to swallow my anxiety down. It was obvious that they were waiting for some kind of statement. The Silverfang demon hunter mated to the Reckless Stalker's evil Alpha. Someone had to say something to restore order, to make things make sense again.

Clearing my throat, I stepped forward, unsheathing one of my spelled knives and holding it up until it caught the light. "Attention, everyone!" I yelled over the din, and the pack fell silent. "Thank you for your concern, but I am fine. This spell doesn't change anything. I'm still one of the best hunters the Silverfang Creek pack has ever had, and that sure as hell isn't going to change!" There were some murmurs of agreement, so I pushed on. "Let it be known here and now, with the entire Silverfang Creek pack as witness, I will be Julian's mate in name only. I, Whitney Gray, refuse to let a villain like Julian Payne ever touch me. And if he tries, I'll kill him myself."

The crowd roared and applauded, but the Alphas all looked grim. I knew they weren't happy about it, but it was the only solution that would keep both me and Julian safe.

"I hope you know what you're doing," Hector said.

I let out a shaky breath, and looked up at my Alpha. "Yeah, so do I."

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:40 am*

I had known fury many times in my life. When my parents abandoned me with Alpha Peter, the first time I had faced down a demon, when Danny turned his back on me, when I discovered how far Rick and Tanner had gone in poisoning Naomi, and a million other lesser times in between.

I was no stranger to fury, but seeing my mate raise her blade to the sunlight and declare that she would never accept me was a new sort of fury...and a betrayal so deep that Danny's betrayal paled in comparison.

How could she? How in the fuck could she!?

Two hours earlier, I had arrived in Silverfang Creek territory just as the mate match ceremony was getting started, and the scents of all the other wolves gathered together had helped me stay hidden. I'd taken wolf form and lain in the undergrowth, watching as the ceremony took place unbeknownst to the rest of the Silverfang Creek pack.

At first, it was amusing, but the amusement shifted to annoyance when I realized that Hector really didn't know I was there. The Silverfang Creek pack was one of the biggest and most notorious, and Hector letting a random wolf from another pack hide so close was crazy to me. But when I spotted Naomi and Danny, and then saw the massive amount of wolves showing up at the ceremony, I understood. Even if he didn't sense me, there was power in numbers. They didn't have to fear for their safety like smaller packs...like my pack.

Seeing Danny and Naomi again was a punch in the gut. I looked Naomi over first, in no small part because I could barely stomach looking at my old friend-turned-enemy. I searched Naomi head to toe with my eyes, looking for any sign that she was still

being affected by the wolfsbane poisoning. It was both a relief and an annoyance to see that she wasn't carrying any outward indications of the poisoning. I hadn't wanted to kill her, but knowing she recovered so completely was frustrating. I had lost everything, any chance for reconciliation with the Red Canines, and Naomi looked even brighter and healthier than before.

Meanwhile, me and my pack were living in rundown cabins in the woods, scrounging for every dollar and every ounce of respect we could get. It wasn't fair. It wasn't right.

Then there was Danny. Seeing him hurt. I missed him, missed that brotherly bond we had shared, but seeing how obviously devoted and protective he still was of Naomi told me that I had made the right choice. He would never be pulled away from his mate, and now that connection was getting him invited to Silverfang Creek territory and a shiny new friendship with Hector.

I swallowed my jealousy down and focused on watching the ceremony.

The crowd parted for a small collection of wolves that had just arrived—two men and a woman being led by a second, taller woman with icy blond hair. I recognized her as the Silverfang's infamous demon hunter Whitney Gray, Naomi and Faye's friend, and a power in her own right. There was a spark of interest when I first laid eyes on her, but she was a Silverfang wolf through and through. So instead, I watched in silent appreciation as she moved across the field, her body lithe and muscular from years of training. The other female with her, Laura, was an attractive enough girl, but I didn't spend much time looking at her or the other two men in their little group.

I wasn't here to get distracted by a woman, though. No matter how much Whitney seemed to fascinate me. I was here to watch and to get information on what the alliance between the Red Canines and the Silverfangs meant, and to see if there was any way to use that connection to my advantage for the Reckless Stalkers. Danny



sure as hell won't put Naomi in danger if he can help it, and if they refuse to get too involved in the demon fighting, then that's where my pack steps in.

Eventually, Whitney and her group made it to the front of the crowd, and Faye became more fixated on the cauldron she was stirring. A hush fell over the crowd as they all realized that the ceremony was finally going to happen. I shifted back to human form, something instinctual telling me that it was the right thing to do for what was coming.

The crowd cheered as the Alphas stepped forward, and I shifted on my haunches, trying to get a better look. Faye was speaking, and then Hector. I couldn't make out all of what they were saying, but got the gist of it—the match ceremony is important, trust the process, all the normal shit that Alphas try to push to keep their pack placated.

Hector was still speaking as Faye dipped her hands into the cauldron, seemingly unbothered by the heat of it. She pulled out two petals, and even from a distance, I could see her entire self change as she read the names. Her spine went stiff with shock, and she seemed to be reading the names on the petals over and over as if she didn't believe what she was seeing at first.

There was something strange in her reaction that caught my attention, and a faint shudder ran through me. Something significant was happening.

Hector stepped up next to Faye, giving her the support she needed to read out the names. "Whitney Gray," she called, tension in her voice, "And Julian Payne."

My name on Faye's lips rang through the field like a gong, and everything seemed to freeze for just a moment.

And then it was like a dam broke, and everyone was moving and talking all at once.

Whitney Gray? My mate? How was this possible?

My heart started pounding in my chest as I looked around, searching for her among the crowd. I had been told stories of fated mates when I was young, but never really believed in them. They were fairy tales told to pups by their parents. It was a nice idea, but it wasn't reality. My parents had proved to me that love isn't enough, not in this world that we all were forced to live in.

But there was no denying what was happening here. My mate match was being read out, and it was Whitney. Strong, powerful, demon-fighting Whitney Gray, untouchable Silverfang darling.

The crowd parted, and I saw her standing in the front, her head raised high even though she was shaking in anger. She was tall, but still short enough for me to rest my chin on top of her head if I wanted to. Her hair was white blonde and long, falling down her back in a single braid. She looked like an angel, and I couldn't stop looking at her.

The crowd gasped and began to chatter, but I could barely hear them. My eyes were fixed on Whitney, who seemed to be in shock. Then her shoulders squared, and I watched as her small group of hunters embraced her to try and calm her. I felt a growl rising in my throat as the two other male wolves touched her, but I kept myself under control. Their body language was brotherly and worried. Platonic, not lovers.

Whitney pushed herself out of their grasp and stood alone. I felt it then, the invisible cord tying us together. Thin, even delicate, not yet strengthened by the mate bite, but it was there. Whitney Gray really was my mate.

Mine , I thought internally, she is MINE .

A million feelings rushed through me, but after the wave, only joy was left behind.

This was why I had been inspired to come here, not for some alliance but for Whitney. I had been looking for legitimacy and there's nothing I could imagine that would be better than my mate being one of the best demon hunters alive, and a Silverfang member too.

Whitney's reputation and toughness would be the perfect complement to my pack. With Whitney by my side, as the new queen of the Reckless Stalkers, there was nothing or no one that could deny that we were a pack deserving of respect anymore.

Of course, we didn't even know each other, but that would come in time. My blood was already running hot, thinking about chasing her through the woods, catching her, biting her, and making her mine for life. I'd be a good mate for Whitney, a strong and worthy one, and I'd prove it as soon as possible. She deserved nothing less than an Alpha.

All my planning for the future came screeching to a halt as Whitney went to talk to the Alphas and their wives before stepping forward and raising her blade to the air. I'd had trouble hearing everyone talking, but Whitney's voice cut through everything loud and clear. "Let it be known here and now, with the Silverfang Creek pack as witness, I will be Julian's mate in name only. I, Whitney Gray, refuse to let a villain like Julian Payne ever touch me. And if he tries, I'll kill him myself."

Her words rang out across the field, and I felt a shudder of horror run through my body. What was she saying? Was this some kind of joke? No one spoke to an Alpha that way. And why was she calling me a villain?

She's rejecting me and she doesn't even know me?

I stared at her, unable to comprehend what was happening. There had to be more to the story than what I was seeing. There had to be a reason that she would say something so damning. The crowd was murmuring, but they seemed happy to see

their demon huntress declaring her independence from me.

All of that exuberance for a rejected mate match...how could that be? I knew my reputation was tarnished, but mate matches were usually met with happiness. But everyone despised me, Silverfang Creek and Red Canine alike.

Most importantly, Whitney didn't want me. She didn't even give me time to prove myself, and the unfairness of it all had anger brewing inside of me. I clenched my fists so hard that my nails were nearly cutting into my palm.

"I hope you know what you're doing," I heard Hector say.

"Yeah, so do I," my mate said.

The crowd continued to cheer, but I felt sick.

Stomach churning, I watched as her group of hunters tried to comfort her again, but Whitney had no desire to be coddled. She shrugged everyone off, and they let her go. She wasn't running, but it was clear that she needed to process the mate match.

To process her link to one of the most hated wolves on the East Coast. Me.

Staying at a distance and still concealed in the woods, I followed Whitney until she made it to her Outback and pulled out of the area where all the other wolves had parked. Panic speared through me—I couldn't lose her just yet, I needed more time to form a plan. So I shifted, grabbed my clothes in my jaw, and loped after the car, staying among the trees the whole time.

I couldn't let her get away.

Fate favored me when Whitney only went a few miles down the road, pulling into the

parking lot of a rarely-used hiking trail. It was overgrown and unkempt but perfect for a wolf that needed to be alone.

Alone. That gave me one hell of an idea.

Danny had used his far-reaching connections to kidnap Naomi and bring her to his territory, and while she had fought him at first, she had given herself over to him soon enough. Now, Whitney was going to be all alone, and it gave me a golden opportunity.

If she wasn't going to give me a chance, I'd just have to force her to.

As beautiful as she was, I could see that Whitney had just returned from battle. There was blood on her cheek and mud on her boots. I knew she was going to put up a fight, but if she was already tired, it shouldn't take me long to overpower her. From there, I could put her into her vehicle and drive us back to Reckless Stalker territory, where Whitney would be forced to hear me out and accept me as her mate. I wasn't about to let her get away from me, not when she could be the key to making my pack whole. Faye would never turn her back on Whitney—she had proven to be loyal to a fault, staying with Naomi in Red Canines territory when she was in danger—and if Faye wanted to keep Whitney in her inner circle, it would be impossible for her and Hector to ignore me. There would be an alliance, like it or not, if their demon huntress was officially mine.

Whitney had taken off down the hiking trail, and while her stride was long and angry, she wasn't hurried. I knew that she was in turmoil, wondering how she ended up connected to a pack enemy, but I'd have all the time in the world to change her mind once I had her.

I stayed in wolf form, moving as silently as possible while keeping her in my eyesight. There was an incline up ahead that curved around and upward, giving me

the perfect opportunity to strike from above. I knew that once I moved on her, there was no turning back. No matter how she fought me, I wouldn't let her go. She was mine and I was hers, and all this foolishness about never wanting to touch me would disappear. I could see the hurt in her eyes when she read out my name. She had been afraid. I couldn't blame her for it, but I could fix it. I could be the mate she needed, and we could be happy together.

There was no denying our connection.

It was getting darker, and the sun was beginning to sink in the sky, but I was ready. I had been watching Whitney for the past half hour, and she was slowing down. The adrenaline from the mate match was wearing off, and the fatigue of the demon hunt was setting in. She would be exhausted, and it would make it easy to take her.

I moved into place, creeping up the incline until I was nearly level with her, and then I attacked. My wolf form made me quick and stealthy, and before she could react, I was on her. I landed hard on her back, throwing her to the ground as my jaws closed over her throat in a warning bite. Not enough to do real damage, but enough to cause pain.

Whitney let out a cry, struggling under me, and I pushed down harder on her.

If you don't fight me, I won't have to hurt you, I thought desperately, willing her to stop resisting. The last thing I wanted to do was really injure my mate, but I didn't have a choice if she wouldn't give in.

I knew she couldn't understand my thoughts, but it seemed like she calmed slightly anyway. Whitney stopped struggling and went still under me, waiting for me to make my move.

I released my hold on her neck, licking her skin gently to ease her pain. She

shuddered under me, and I had to fight the urge to growl in pleasure. Even though we were enemies, and she had just been attacking me, there was no denying how good she felt under me. I could feel the heat of her body, even through my clothes, and the smell of her hair and skin was intoxicating. My blood was running hot, and I wanted to mount her right then and there and take her as mine.

This damned fascination was going to be the death of me, and Whitney quickly proved it. I moved off of her, thinking that maybe she'd come willingly instead of having to be kidnapped, but the demon huntress had just been playing calm to get my guard down. The second I relaxed, she was on me, kicking my knee out from underneath me and then tackling me to the ground. I fell hard, the air knocked from my lungs, and before I could catch my breath, she was on top of me.

With me still in wolf form and her in her human skin, the fight was fierce and difficult.

I tried to bite at her legs, her arms, anything I could get to, but Whitney was fast and brutal. She managed to twist my jaw at an angle that hurt like hell, and I howled in pain. That seemed to only make her angrier, and she started punching me. Her punches were aimed at the sides of my head, trying to knock me out.

But I wasn't about to let my mate get away from me. I wouldn't lose her.

Whitney landed a solid blow on my head, but it only served to make me angrier. I shifted, not caring that I was now completely naked under her, grabbed her by her shoulders, and flipped us over. The fight went on for several more minutes, but in the end, I had her pinned. We were both breathing heavily, exhausted from the fight. I stared down at her, trying to memorize every detail of her face, and then I shifted my gaze lower.

Even though we were enemies, I knew Whitney was gorgeous. Her breasts heaved as

she struggled under me, and I could feel every inch of her body pressed against me. Blood rushed south, and I had to bite back a groan.

Those thoughts ended abruptly when she froze, recognition kicking in. "You!" she hissed, enraged. "How dare you come after me like this! You fucking asshole!"

Her voice was low and intense, and she was clearly furious with me. I had thought that she would be afraid after our initial encounter, but if anything, she seemed angrier than before. I had to admit, it was a turn-on. I loved how strong she was.

"Hello, Mate," I purred. "It's so nice to have a chance to talk."



## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:40 am*

Never in my childhood dreams did I imagine the day I was matched with a mate would go like this.

Julian was strong as hell, and he had me pinned. I still had a little gas in the tank, but I was familiar enough with my own body to know that I was close to complete exhaustion. If I kept fighting him with everything in me, he'd have me unconscious in no time, and that was way more dangerous than being awake but in his grasp.

"I don't have anything to say to you," I spit at him, not wanting him to think that we were anything more than enemies. "Let me go."

He smiled down at me, a slow grin that I hated because it made him even more handsome. "Don't be like that, Whitney. You're my mate. You can't deny it."

I wanted to fight him on that, but I knew he was right. That didn't mean anything was going to change, though. He was still the man who poisoned Naomi and abandoned his pack. He was still the enemy. "I don't give a fuck what two flower petals say. I'll never be your mate, Julian Payne. Now let me go."

He laughed, clearly enjoying having me under him. My cheeks heated at the position, and I hated that he could see my embarrassment. "Not so fast, beautiful," he said, using a pet name that only made me hate him more. "We have things to discuss."

My heart was pounding hard. I hated the man above me. Hated him so strongly that I could taste it on my tongue like bitter iron.

I couldn't take him on my own, not in this condition, but I didn't need to kill him

myself. I just needed to call for my allies. My pack would end this power fantasy that he was indulging in fast.

One more burst of energy to get him off me long enough to get my phone and call Laura or anyone else in the pack, and I'd be free of Julian in no time. I was so damned tired, but it had to be done. I thought about how Danny had taken Naomi and it made my mouth go dry. Danny turned out to be a good guy, but Julian had already shown us his true colors.

He tried to kill Naomi. Well, he'd be more likely to kill me than get me to accept him as my mate—because it wasn't happening.

He was talking, rambling about mating rituals and alliances, but I had tuned him out to plan my escape from his grasp. The last thing I wanted to do was hear his voice or look into those gorgeous eyes. It wasn't fair that he was so damned attractive and awful at the same time.

Tall and packed with muscle, Julian was one hell of a male specimen, evil or not. His hair was midnight black, and his eyes were an odd hazel color that had gold, green, and brown mixed into them. When the sun hit them, like it was now, green was dominant. He had a strong nose, almost too big but somehow perfect on his face, and a smile that pulled up farther on the left than the right. Dark hair dusted his chest, and while there was the temptation to look lower, I held back. His scent of black pepper and leather made it hard to concentrate, but I was a professional. A warrior at heart. And I just needed to wait until his guard was down once more.

Then it came. He dipped his head, running his nose up my neck and drinking in my scent, his hold on my wrists letting up just the slightest bit.

That's all I needed.

I used every last ounce of strength and wiggled out from under him, rolling away and getting to my feet as quickly as possible. I didn't need to see where he was—I could feel him. The mate bond was thin and new, but still present enough that I knew exactly where Julian was.

It was unsettling, to say the least.

When he whipped around to grab me again, I kicked out, my boot meeting his jaw with a sickening crack. I winced internally—it was a pretty jaw, and that sounded painful as hell—but he was a wolf. We heal fast. And Julian would have plenty of time to heal after I escaped.

I turned, ready to run, but he was on his feet in a flash, growling and stalking toward me. I swallowed hard at his expression—he was pissed. But so was I.

And my phone was already in my hand.

I pressed the button for the last person I'd texted, Laura, and ran like hell.

Julian was behind me in a flash, and I could feel him closing in on me. I didn't know where I was going or what I was doing, but I knew that I couldn't let him catch me. Not now. Not ever.

I was breathing hard, my body exhausted, but I didn't dare slow down. Julian had already shown himself to be cunning and vicious, and I had to stay one step ahead of him if I wanted to get out of this alive.

Laura was a demon slayer, and she was only about 10 minutes away from me. I knew that she would bring help and that we could defeat Julian together. I just needed to stay alive until then.

It was getting harder and harder to breathe. My lungs were burning, my throat dry, and my legs felt like they were going to give out at any moment. Julian was behind me, a constant shadow that never stopped chasing. I had to fight the urge to glance back and see how close he was.

The trail was starting to slope up, the incline growing steeper with every step. But I had hope, my phone still in my hand. I barely had any breath to speak, but I figured Laura must have picked up by now, and I raised the device to my ear—

Call failed, it read. No reception.

"FUCK!" I screamed, my voice echoing through the trees.

I heard Julian snarling behind me, and I knew that the end was near.

I couldn't get away from him. I was going to die here, all alone on this god-forsaken hiking trail, killed by the man who had tried to poison my friend and then kidnapped me. Because he'd have to kill me. I wasn't going with him. Not now. Not ever.

With my senses heightened, I knew he was about to be on me, and I tucked my hands, my phone still clutched in one of them, to my chest to make sure I didn't lose the device when he hit me from behind. I tried to brace myself, but it didn't help much.

Julian slammed into me, his arms wrapping around my waist as he tackled me to the ground. We rolled a few times, and then he was on top of me again. I let out a scream as my head cracked against a large rock on the ground, pain blossoming across the back of my skull.

He growled in my ear, "Shut up, or I'll make you."

I whimpered, wanting to fight him, but there was no way that I could. He was too

strong, and I was already injured. My vision was swimming, and I could feel blood trickling down the back of my neck from the blow to my head.

His nostrils flared as he scented the blood, and Julian's expression changed in an instant. The anger on his face was replaced by concern, and he reached up to gently brush the hair away from my face. I flinched at his touch, but he ignored me, turning my head slightly so he could see the wound.

"Oh fuck," he murmured. "You're bleeding."

I glared at him, "No shit, Sherlock."

"Don't be like that," he said, a hint of anger creeping back into his voice. He pressed around the wound, and while it hurt, it was surface level. "A bad cut, but your skull seems intact."

"I don't give a fuck about my head, I want you off me," I growled at him, still angry as hell. "And I have nothing to say to you. Let me go."

I was blindly jamming my thumb against my phone screen, trying to hit the 'retry' button to try and call Laura again. I'd never wished for an old-style button phone more in my life. My head was pounding, and despite how furious I was, I knew there was no way out of this without help.

Julian opened his mouth to say something, but then a sound emanated from near my chest, and I almost laughed from relief. The sound of a phone line ringing.

His expression hardened, and he snatched the phone out of my hands before I could stop him, but it didn't matter. My location was on, and they'd be worried enough by the halted call to come to my rescue I was sure of it.

Julian looked at the phone screen and growled in frustration. "I'm going to give you this back, and you're going to call them off."

I had sat up and scooted away from him but refused to take the offered phone. "No, I don't think so."

Julian closed his eyes, and I could see him processing his sudden loss of control of the situation. I expected him to rage, maybe even attack me, wishing true harm this time, but I was surprised when he raked a hand through his hair and sighed. "Then let me offer you a proposition."

Thrown off, I stopped prodding at the cut on my head and looked at him. "What in the hell could you possibly offer me?"

"Protection." I started to laugh, but he held up a hand to stop me. "Not for you. For your pack. I wouldn't even be in this territory, except I came here to offer Hector my wolves to guard the perimeter of Silverfang Creek territory in return for a simple favor. Our mate match changed everything, but I can still offer that. Call your wolves, tell them nothing is wrong, and you'll gain the strength of my pack in your fight against the demons."

My eyes widened in surprise. "How did you know..."

He raised an eyebrow, looking smug. "It was clear as day that you'd been fighting demons. You've got their blood on your boots, for one. Secondly, your reputation precedes you, demon hunter Whitney. Everyone in the shifter world knows who you are, and how good you are at what you do."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "But you tried to kill Naomi."

His face shuttered, but then he shrugged. "Think what you want. That's what the

demons want, right? To turn us against each other until we're all easy pickings?"

"How did you..."

"I've been fighting them for years," he interrupted. "I was Danny's right hand, his best fighter. Plus, I know you need help, whether you want to admit it or not."

"I have a team." I countered.

"I know you do. With one other unmated female wolf...and two recently mated males. How long until their mates call them home to stay, and want them out of danger?"

His words hit me hard. "But...I mean...the pack..."

Julian snorted. "Yeah, most of that pack isn't going to fight demons. They've all got husbands, or wives, and pups. Demons? Not happening."

I bit the inside of my cheek. He wasn't totally wrong.

Julian held out my phone again, and I was annoyed with how tempting the offer was. "I've got ten unmated, well-seasoned wolves that have all fought demons before. Call off your friends, Whitney, and I'll triple your manpower in a snap."

"This isn't something you can just snap your fingers and make it so," I said, getting irritated. "This is a big deal, and I don't know you. Why should I trust you?"

He took a step closer to me, and I wanted to scoot away but held my ground. "You don't have to trust me. But I have more information about the demon attacks than you know, and if you have me dragged off by your hunters, then you'll never get to know. You might hate me, Whitney, but we've got a common enemy, and that goes a hell of

a long way.”

“You tried to kill Naomi,” I repeated. “Why in the hell would I trust you with anything?”

His jaw ticked, but he didn’t back down. “Naomi’s alive, isn’t she? Come on, Whitney. Ten wolves. Ten unmated, battle-ready wolves.”

I swallowed hard, looking at this man who had kidnapped me and tried to force me into mating with him. I hated him, but he was right.

Dammit, he really was right.

I snatched the phone out of his hand and called Laura, explaining that I had called and then lost service as soon as the call connected and that nothing was wrong. I told her I just needed some time alone, and she was sympathetic, agreeing easily.

Then I hung up and looked at Julian. “You’re going to swear an oath to me right here, right now, or I’m calling her back and you’re done. If you betray me, if you break your oath, if you try to harm my packmates in any way, I will kill you. I swear it.”

He nodded. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Despite my better judgment, I let Julian shift back to wolf form, and then return fully dressed in human form to discuss the deal we had just made. It was maybe one of the stupidest things I’d ever done, but I needed food and rest before I was going to be able to fight my way out of his grasp again.

It could go two ways. Either he was being honest and the Reckless Stalkers would guard the Silverfang Creek perimeter, sparing our wolves from harm while we investigated the demon issue or he lied, and by the time his lies came to light, I’d be



far away from him and back in the fold of my pack, safe.

No matter how it shook out, it was the best chance I had to live another day.

Julian told me about his tenuous new territory and how they had found multiple demon hotspots while scoping it out. When I tried to turn the conversation back to Danny and Naomi he refused, but I managed to suss out that his original plan had been to have Faye find a witch for his sad little ‘pack’ in exchange for protection.

Now, he just wanted me as his ally. He was smart enough to know that the Silverfangs weren’t going to offer him and his ragtag bunch of wolves an alliance, but me alone? I could sacrifice for my pack. I’d never be his mate, but if he was willing to help me hunt so Keifer and Bruce could have some time with their family after months on the road, it would be worth it. Especially if it meant we killed some demons and got some information about why the attacks were increasing so suddenly.

So I agreed to go with him and his little pack, and he agreed to swear an oath.

We were going to work together, and there would be no funny business. Julian laughed at that part.

“You can’t deny me forever. I’m your mate. I don’t intend to forget that, just because we have some little oath. I won’t interfere with your work, but when we’re not hunting... all bets are off, Whitney.”

“Go fuck yourself.”

“I just might. You provide plenty of inspiration.”

I wanted to rip his head off his shoulders and kick it down the hiking trail like a soccer ball, but I restrained myself. Julian really was one of the best fighters around,

and he'd be one hell of an asset, if only he would drop the mate shit.

We agreed to meet up later tonight at a riverside restaurant called Taurus and hammer out the details of how all of this would work. Julian insisted that there was increased activity near his new pack's territory and that I needed to come and see it in person. I was skeptical, thinking he just wanted to isolate me, and insisted that I be able to bring an ally of my own. The idea made Julian growl, but he agreed when I pushed.

We walked back down the trail in awkward silence, unwanted attraction, at least on my end, and the threat of violence coursing between us. We parted ways at the trailhead, him disappearing into the trees and me heading for my car, but he called after me, "Whitney...don't think we're done with this conversation."

"Yeah, I know," I said without looking back. "We have to hash out the details, but trust me. We're done talking about the mating stuff."

He didn't reply, so I just kept walking to my car. I didn't feel any better when I got in and shut the door behind me. My mate was a fucking lunatic. A gorgeous, powerful, determined lunatic that I couldn't stand, and had to work with. I had no idea how I was going to make this work.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:40 am*

Letting Whitney go felt impossible, but I had no choice. My more animalistic side was howling for me to just grab her and take her back to Reckless Stalker territory, but we had made a deal.

And I can't believe she bought into my lies.

Part of me felt a little remorseful that it had to be that way, but Whitney was a lot more than I expected. She was wild and ferocious enough that I thought I'd lost to her multiple times during the fight. When she threatened to call in her reinforcements, I'd had to think on my feet, and I'd abandoned my hope for a pack witch, choosing instead to keep Whitney from having the entire wrath of the Silverfangs come down on me.

I'd spun a tale for her and somehow she'd believed it. All that time, though, I'd formed a much different plan in my heart.

Get her to my territory, isolate her, and make her mine. All I needed to do was hold her until she agreed to the mating ritual. Hell, I'd lock her in my cabin if I had to. Anything to keep her at my side.

I had been drawn to her immediately, but my obsession was kept in check until I had pinned her the first time. Once I was able to smell her, feel her skin, and hear her heartbeat, it was all over.

Everything had been taken from me in life. My parents, my pack, my best friend...I sure as hell wasn't going to lose my mate. Somehow fate had gifted me the strongest, most beautiful she-wolf, and I deserve her after everything I've lost.

I've made mistakes, but I'm not a bad man. At least not fully. I should be able to have this one good thing.

For now, though, she was meeting me at Taurus, a steakhouse on the river, to discuss what happens next. I've convinced her that the demons are more prevalent in my territory than hers, and while it wasn't totally a lie, I've come to understand that activity is growing everywhere.

And I needed her isolated to keep her. I almost understood Danny's obsession with Naomi now that Whitney was in my sphere. My mate is burning me from the inside out with how badly I want her. The difference is that Whitney would make my pack stronger. Danny had lost everything because of Naomi, but I'd be a fool to let Whitney go.

The restaurant was dimly lit and wood-paneled, and I could smell the savory scents of cooking meat wafting through the air as soon as I walked through the doors. A hostess showed me to a booth near the back, and I slid into the seat facing the entrance, wanting to be able to see Whitney as soon as she walked in.

She was angry, but there was no way she could refuse me now. We were in the middle of a demonic crisis, and she knew as well as I did that we needed each other. The Silverfangs were stretched thin as they were, and the Red Canines weren't going to be able to just throw wolves at the problem while they were rebuilding. We were the best choice to combat the demons.

My head whipped up as soon as the door opened, and my breath caught in my chest when she entered the restaurant. She was wearing dark jeans and a tight black sweater with a plunging V-neck that revealed the creamy swells of her breasts. Her hair was pulled up into a high ponytail that exposed her long, delicate neck. She'd done something with her make-up to make her eyes look even more gorgeous than they had earlier in the day.

She'd also washed the blood from her cheek and from her hair. Whitney was a woman of many sides I was learning. Beautiful, deadly, strong, but still somehow elegant. She was perfect.

"Hey," she said when she slid into the seat across from me. "You're early."

I shrugged, unable to stop staring at her. "I'm always early when it's something I want."

Her cheeks flushed slightly. "Oh, okay. Well, I'm not hungry, so let's get down to business."

I frowned. "You're not hungry? After the workout you gave me this morning?"

"Don't try to be cute. I hate you, Julian. Please keep that in mind during our conversation."

I grinned. "Noted, but I know you want me."

She narrowed her eyes at me, but her cheeks were pink.

"Okay, then," I said. "You want to start with the Red Canines or the Silverfangs?"

She leaned back, crossing her arms over her chest. "It doesn't matter. They both hate this plan and want to rip your throat out. Hector has a hard time believing that the Reckless Stalkers are worth sending Laura and me with you, while Danny wants you dead and in the ground. If it were up to them, you'd be shit out of luck."

That didn't surprise me. "So what changed?"

"Faye. She conceded that they were stretched thin trying to guard the perimeter when

everyone was reluctant to be away from home for too long when there is a demon threat. It still almost all fell apart because Danny was so against it. Hector asked him if accepting the deal would hurt their alliance, and if Danny had said yes, there would be no deal. But Danny finally relented—on the condition that you never go near him or Naomi again. I have permission to travel with you for as long as it takes to find out where the demons are coming from, and as soon as it's dealt with, I'm supposed to come home."

I raised an eyebrow, surprised at her description of the alphas. "Just like that, huh? "

She shrugged one shoulder, looking unconcerned. "Outside of Hector and Faye, I'm a pretty high-ranking, trusted pack member. They trust me, and they don't want me to go, but it's the safety of the pack over the safety of a single member—me. It's just the way of things. Alphas have to make hard decisions sometimes, and that's one of them. They want to protect their people."

I nodded, but my mind was whirling. She didn't seem to be lying, which meant that we were on the clock. I wanted Whitney isolated, and that meant getting her away from her pack as soon as possible.

The server came by and despite her earlier claims that she wasn't hungry, Whitney ordered a porterhouse steak and a loaded baked potato. I ordered the same and when the server left, I leaned forward with a smile.

"Good news for you, then," I said. "My territory is close to where the most activity has been recently. My men have reported at least two separate groups of demons moving in the area, but they haven't been able to get close enough to know how many there are or where they are coming from. It's the perfect opportunity to check things out."

Whitney was quiet for a moment. "It's not the run-of-the-mill demons that are the

real issue. It's finding out why they seem to be targeting certain individuals above others."

"Faye and her daughter. Don't worry, I didn't spy on your precious pack. I was still with the Red Canines when Danny made it public knowledge."

"Oh."

I waited for her to say something else, but she was quiet. "We can leave tomorrow morning if you don't have anything holding you up."

She nodded, but her mind seemed far away.

The server came by with our food, and I watched Whitney tear into the steak like she'd been starved for days. The hunger had finally hit her. She finished it in record time and then sat back looking embarrassed. "Sorry," she said. "I guess I was hungry after all."

"It's fine. You need to eat more than that to keep up your energy, though. You're going to be fighting demons, not taking a stroll in the park."

"I know how to feed myself. And I promise you, I know way more about fighting demons than you do. I would have eaten earlier, except an asshole attacked me in the woods." Her gaze was pointed and accusatory. "And then I lost my appetite after I had to get these."

Whitney pulled some of her white-blond hair aside to show me the staples closing the wound on her scalp. She had hit the rock pretty damn hard, but werewolves are made of strong stuff. The wound was red and angry in the paleness of her hair, but it wasn't bleeding and there was no sign of infection.

I swallowed hard as I stared at the wound. “Well, you survived.”

“Yeah, lucky me,” she snapped.

I shook my head at her, confused. “You really are a mystery to me, Whitney. You act like you don’t want me, but your words aren’t matching what your body is saying.”

She snorted but didn’t say anything.

“Tell me about yourself,” I said. “You know all about me. Now it’s your turn to spill.”

“We’re not here to get to know each other, Julian.”

I sighed. “Look, this whole thing is going to be a lot less painful if we can just try to get along. We’ll be working together for at least the next two weeks, so let’s try to be friendly. Tell me what you like to do besides hunt demons.”

She was quiet for a moment. “Hiking. I love to hike. Being in the woods feels like coming home. I’m a descendant of the Norse gods, so it makes sense, I guess.”

I nodded but didn’t say anything. My ancestors were mostly German, French, and English. “Do you have a favorite trail?”

“There’s a place called Goose Lake outside of my hometown that has some really great hikes. What about you?”

I shrugged. “I used to like fishing when I was younger. Never really got into hiking, though.”

“Maybe we can find some time to go hiking while we’re on the hunt.”



My heart leaped into my throat. Maybe she was beginning to come around. I decided to test my luck. “If we can get some time away from the rest of the pack, I think I’d enjoy that.”

“Don’t push it. I’m only working with you because you’re a lesser evil.”

“Why are you so determined to fight this, Whitney? I know you can feel the same things I do.”

“The only thing I feel is irritation and a need to punch you in the face. Repeatedly.”

I sighed. “You’ll have your chance soon enough. I want to see what we can find out about the demons before I bring you into my territory.”

“Fine by me,” she snapped, pushing her plate away. “Let’s get out of here. I’m ready to go home.”

I didn’t move, just looked at her. “It doesn’t have to be like this. You could just accept that we’re mates.”

Whitney laughed. “I wish it was that easy. Mating isn’t something I ever considered. It’s not something I want. I don’t have time for it or the distraction it brings. And I certainly don’t want to be mated to an enemy of my pack.”

Her words were like a punch in the gut, but I forced myself to look unaffected. I smiled at her, letting my eyes roam over her body. “Well, your body says differently, Sweetheart.”

She growled at me, showing me her teeth. “I’m not your sweetheart.”

She wasn’t denying my words. “Sure thing, Sweetheart.”

“You’re a dick, Julian. I don’t know what you think you see in me, but I promise you there’s nothing there for you to grab onto.”

The server came by to pick up the check, and I looked at Whitney while he was there. “We’re going to need another moment.”

“Okay,” he said, walking away quickly.

“I think you’re full of shit,” I said. “I think you’re attracted to me and that makes you angry because you’re trying to convince yourself that you’re not.”

“You attacked me just a few hours ago. Attacked. Your teeth were around my throat.”

“We’re wolves.”

“And?”

“And that’s just foreplay, Sweetheart.”

That was enough to piss her off to the point that she stood, clearly intending to leave. I hadn’t meant to push her so far, but arguing with Whitney was fun. Making her angry was fun. Seeing the fire in her eyes was incredible. But my mate was tired and had had enough of whatever was going on between us.

I stood as well, grabbing her wrist as she turned away.

“Let go,” she growled, not looking at me.

I let my voice drop low so she could hear every ounce of truth in it. I already knew she would refuse me, but I’d be a fool not to try. “Stay with me tonight. Take some of that hate out on me, Whitney. I’ll let you. And then I’ll show you how good of a mate

I'll be."

Whitney's gaze shot up to mine, and she drew in a shuddering breath. I could smell her scent, candied lemons, and the slightest hint of copper from her wound—it made me want to taste her from head to toe. For one brilliant moment, I thought she might agree, but then she shook her head, blond hair flying.

"No. Never." She stepped back and I released her wrist. "Good night, Julian."

"I enjoyed our first date!" I called after her. She flipped me off over her shoulder.

Oh, she could be mad tonight. But tomorrow, she was leaving town with me, and I'd be one step closer to having my mate totally alone. We'd see how prickly she was after I put the mate bite on her.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:40 am*

One week later

I didn't expect much out of Julian's pack 'territory', but I was infinitely relieved that my car did so well off-road when we reached the last portion of the directions he had given me. My Outback bumped happily over the dirt road, but my passenger wasn't handling the ride quite as well.

"Does he live in the middle of the fucking woods? What sort of Red Riding Hood shit is this?"

I suppressed a laugh, looking over at Laura, who was holding on to the grab bar to keep her steady. She looked a little green around the gills, but sick or not, I was happy to have her with me. Hector and Danny hadn't wanted me to come at all, but after some heated arguing, they'd agreed. Having my friend with me helped settle my nerves, and I knew that Laura was an incredible fighter, too.

"He told me his cabin was pretty remote," I said. "It's just a little further down this way."

Laura sighed. "I can't believe we're here doing this shit. This is going to be a waste of time. He's just on your case because of the mate match thing."

I thinned my lips. I'd thought the same thing multiple times, but Julian had kept up his part of the deal so far when five members of his pack showed up to guard the Silverfang Creek perimeter. "Maybe, maybe not. But if he's being even half truthful, it's worth a shot."

Laura sighed again. “Well, I’m just here for moral support.”

“And demon punching.”

She laughed. “And demon punching.”

We’d been fighting demons together since we were teenagers. We had different roles, but we both knew what needed to be done. Laura was a strategist, a thinker. She would see the bigger picture and how it fit into the puzzle. I was a doer. I saw the smaller details that sometimes made the difference in a fight. Together, we were unstoppable.

The dirt road ended at a small clearing where two pickup trucks and a Jeep were already parked. A little further out was a crescent of cabins dotted about—the Reckless Stalker’s homes. Julian stepped out of the largest one as we parked, and came forward.

He was dressed casually today in a white t-shirt and a pair of faded jeans, but his eyes were on me as soon as I got out of the car. “I’m glad you came.”

“Yeah, well, I can’t say the same.” I crossed my arms and looked around the clearing. “This is...remote.”

Julian bristled but kept his cool. “It’s home,” he said simply. “Come on, I’ll show you guys your cabin. Unless you want to stay with me, Whitney.”

“I think I’ll pass,” I said dryly.

Julian nodded once, his lips twitching. “As you wish. Let’s get your bags. My guys will bring them to your cabin while we discuss our plan.”

“Fine.” I grabbed my backpack and purse and followed Julian toward the cabins. There were five of them arranged in a semi-circle around a fire pit that was set up with logs for seats. They weren’t fancy, but they were obviously well-cared for with freshly painted doors and windows, neatly trimmed shrubbery, and cleanly swept front porches. A large grill sat to one side of the fire pit, and I imagined summer nights with the pack gathered around it.

Julian led us to the farthest cabin, which had a small porch that held two rocking chairs. The door swung open on silent hinges when he turned the knob and stepped inside. “This is my spare,” he said, “So it’s just a one-bedroom.”

Laura and I followed him inside. It wasn’t bad. There was a small kitchen off the left of the door, a living room on the right, and a hallway that I assumed led to the bathroom and bedroom. I nodded and dumped my bags in the middle of the floor.

It was unsettling to know he was so close. I’d be able to hear him moving around at night if he was close enough.

Julian gave Laura a tour of our cabin while I looked around, opening the fridge and the cabinets, checking the closets, and peeking into the drawers in the bedroom. There was a small stack of towels in the closet, but otherwise, everything was clean and bare. It felt like camping more than someone’s home.

“Are you satisfied?” Julian asked when I walked back into the living room. “It’s just as I said, empty.”

I nodded. “It’s fine. I was just looking around.”

“Alright. Let’s head over to my cabin and talk about the plan.”

Laura grabbed my arm as I started to follow him out of the cabin. “Are you sure

about this?" she whispered.

"No, but what choice do we have?"

"None," she sighed, "I guess. I just don't want to see you get hurt."

"Me neither," I said, "But Julian isn't going to hurt me. At least not yet."

"If you say so."

We followed Julian into his cabin. I was surprised to see how warm and homey it looked. He'd told me it was empty, and that had been the truth. There was nothing personal anywhere. The fridge was empty, there was no mail on the counter or coffee table, and everything looked newly cleaned.

But the living room had two camping chairs, a sofa, a coffee table, and a big-screen TV. There was a stack of DVDs next to a DVD player, and a pile of video game cartridges next to the Xbox. The kitchen had the bare essentials—a coffee maker, a microwave, and a small stove.

"This is nicer than I expected," I said, walking over to peek into his fridge. As I suspected, it was empty. "Basically, what I'd expect from a bunch of men living together without a woman's touch. What do you all eat?"

"We, uh...we hunt."

I stilled, shutting the fridge as I stood up straight. Hunting and eating a rabbit in wolf form was one thing—hell, I'd done it once or twice myself—but using that tactic as their main form of sustenance was crazy. "Really giving yourself over to the wolf out here, huh?"

“It’s efficient,” Julian shrugged, crossing his arms as he leaned against the counter. “And it gives us a chance to run wild. But I’ll make sure to get groceries.”

I frowned, turning to look at him. “Don’t you ever get tired of it?”

“Of being a wolf? Never.”

“But do you ever miss the human side? The modern conveniences I mean?”

“Sometimes, but I don’t let myself think about it too much. We have what we need out here.”

“Except food.”

He sighed and nodded. “Well, yeah, but we’re working on that. Our nearest town is two hours away, so we don’t have a lot of options.”

I turned away from him and walked over to the DVD collection sitting next to the Xbox. There were a bunch of action movies, mostly superhero or alien stuff. I sighed at the lack of variety, but I wasn’t surprised. Men were so predictable. “So you’re all living out here, miles from civilization, hunting your food, and playing video games. Sounds like a bunch of frat boys.”

Julian shrugged. “We are a little. We have fun, but we also work hard. This isn’t just a vacation spot, it’s our home.”

Laura crossed her arms and leaned against the wall. “Sounds like a great time,” she said dryly.

We were getting too far off-topic, and while it was fun to pick on Julian, we couldn’t let our guard down around him. Not really. With Julian, Laura and I were operating



off the ‘enemy of my enemy is my friend’ principle. As soon as the demon threat was dealt with, Julian and the Reckless Stalkers would fall right back into the enemy category. For now, though? We were uneasy allies.

“Let’s talk about what we’re doing here,” I said, sitting down on the couch. It was surprisingly comfortable.

“What do you want to know?” he asked, moving over to lean against the back of the couch. He stood close enough to me that I could feel the heat coming off his body.

“We’ve been fighting demons for a while,” I said, shifting slightly away from him. I needed some space between us, even if it was just a few inches. “You told me you’ve been having issues with them for the past few weeks, and that you have some hot spots out here, whatever that means.”

Laura dropped herself into one of the camping chairs while Julian sighed and started pacing. “We think they’re keeping tabs on us. The few altercations we’ve had didn’t seem to be pointed, but instead, out-of-control demons or just the result of unintended run-ins. I don’t think we have anything they want—and I say we as in the Reckless Stalkers. But I think they also know wolves are the enemy, and other wolves DO have what they want. Witches. I can show you where we’ve had a few fights and where I think they camped out to watch us before we ran them off.”

I tapped my fingers on the arm of the couch in thought. “I’m not sure what I’m going to find, but it’s better than nothing. Anything else I should know?”

“They aren’t particularly strong. A few good hits will take them down. Most of them don’t fight, they just run. That’s why I think they’re lookouts and not meant to be engaging us.”

I glanced at Laura. “That sounds like what we’re dealing with at home. Except for the

running part. The ones in our territory want blood.”

Laura clicked her tongue. “You mean they want Faye and Sienna, and they’re happy to spill blood to try and get to them.”

“Correct.” I turned to Julian, who seemed surprised with my direct look. “Listen, I don’t intend on talking about the Red Canines with you, but I do want to ask something that I’ve been unable to get an answer about from anyone else. Why in the world are they after Faye and Sienna so heavily but they leave the Canine’s witch Saul alone? I was led to believe he’s rather powerful.”

Julian leaned against the wall, scratching his jaw as he mulled the question over. “I was gone by the time Danny and his cronies found anything out, but I still have connections in the Canines.”

“Who?” I asked quickly, hoping to catch him off guard. I’m sure Danny would want to know if one of his wolves was feeding Julian intel.

Julian scowled. “Nice try, but I’m not telling you. Anyway, my intel says that they’ve found some clues in their research and still have to confirm it before making it public knowledge...but the thought is it’s less about Faye and Sienna being witches and more about their bloodline and the fact they both have wolf AND witch blood. Saul is a heavy hitter, but he’s human through and through. I heard that Peter even offered to bite him and initiate the change, but Saul refused.”

Laura leaned forward in her chair. “What makes you think their bloodline matters? I can buy the wolf witch thing, but the bloodline part doesn’t make much sense.”

“Because there’s always a pattern with demons,” I said. “They’re smart enough to keep us guessing, but eventually you can see what they want if you pay attention. It’s a game of hide and seek for them. They hide their plan, but we’re smart enough to

figure it out.”

“I just hope you’re right,” Laura said.

“We’ll find out soon enough,” I said, getting to my feet. “I’m going to get the rest of our stuff and then I’d like to take a walk and get a feel for this area.”

Julian nodded. “Let me know what you need.”

I walked out of his cabin and across the circle to ours, Laura on my heels. We unloaded the rest of the car and put everything away. It didn’t take long since we’d only packed a few bags and had brought as little as possible. We weren’t here for a vacation.

Laura tossed her bag on the bed and fell backward onto it with a sigh. “Well, that was a lot of nothing.”

“I know,” I groaned, sitting on the edge of the bed. “But I have to be thorough. We’ve never had information about demons before. If there’s something to learn, I want to learn it.”

“Even if it means being around Julian?”

“Yes,” I said. “Even if it means being around Julian.”

\*\*\*

We unpacked and ate a few sandwiches before changing into our hunting gear and went to find Julian. He was armed with a shotgun and a machete that had a well-worn handle. I didn’t want to admit it, but seeing him ready for battle stirred something deep inside me. Julian looked hot as hell holding that machete and wearing cargo

pants that showed off his long, muscular legs. It wasn't fair that the enemy was so damn good-looking.

"Ready?" he asked, looking us over.

"Yeah, let's do it."

The drive to the spot where the first demon had been spotted took less than ten minutes, and Julian explained a little more about how the Reckless Stalkers operated as he drove. The pack was still new and made up of mostly older wolves who'd grown tired of the direction Danny was taking the Red Canines. Julian led them, and they'd chosen to move out into the woods because it was easier to get away from everything there.

I didn't mention it to Julian, but I thought it was a pretty big waste of their time to start a new pack with nothing to do. I knew there was some tension between the Silverfangs and Red Canines, but they had set it all aside for Naomi's sake and faced the demon threat as a united front. It was a waste of energy to fight amongst ourselves when demons were such a huge threat.

The spot looked like a rough campsite that had no rhyme or reason, and it reeked of sulfur—a clear demon sign. I pulled my phone out and started snapping pictures while I walked around, looking for anything out of the ordinary.

"They left in a hurry," Laura said, crouching down to look at the remains of a campfire. "These ashes are cold, but there aren't any signs that it rained recently."

I nodded. "Julian, you said you came out here right before we did? Did it rain?"

"No, not a drop," he said. He was standing by the edge of the campsite, his hand resting on the handle of his machete. He looked like a warrior, ready to take on

whatever might come his way. I pushed the thought from my mind and looked back down at the firepit.

“Okay,” I said, looking around. “They were here, but I’m guessing they heard you coming and got out of here before you could catch them. They must have some kind of communication system because this fire is pretty fresh. It looks like it was lit a few days ago.”

“It was,” Julian agreed. “It’s been two days since we came out here, and this fire is exactly how we left it. Whatever is going on, it’s recent.”

I walked over to him, and he was so tall compared to me, it felt like standing next to a tree. “This isn’t normal demon behavior. They’re normally smarter than this, more covert. I think—”

I didn’t get time to finish my sentence before the demon dropped down out of the canopy above us, landing on Laura with an unearthly screech. Laura rolled to avoid being pinned under the demon, which was a horrible-looking thing, its decayed flesh hanging off its bones. This demon should have found a new body a long time ago, but for some reason, it hadn’t managed.

Julian’s shotgun boomed, and the demon’s head exploded into black ichor. The rest of the body collapsed as soon as the head was gone, and Laura scrambled away from it, spitting the ichor from her mouth.

I ran over to her, crouching down beside her. “Are you hurt?”

“No,” she said, wiping her mouth. “But that’s disgusting.”

“Tell me about it.”

The demon was already decaying, its flesh sloughing off like it had never been attached to the bones at all. The pop of light it created was small and unimpressive, but I didn't have time to dwell on it...

Because there was more.

I pulled my blades from their sheathes as the new demons fell from the trees above, and I could see Laura and Julian preparing to fight, too. It didn't take long for me to realize something odd was going on, because not a single demon turned to face my two allies. Instead, they all seemed fixated on me.

Shit.

I dodged the first attack, lashing out with my knife to slice open a demon's arm as it sailed past me. Its wail was loud and piercing, and I winced at the sound. Julian's shotgun boomed as he took down another one, but I knew we had to move. If these were scouts, they had to report back to their master. We needed to take them all out.

"Laura!" I called, running over to her. "We need to move! They're scouts!"

She nodded, pulling two throwing knives from her belt. She let them fly, sinking into the eyes of two demons that had been advancing on her. "On it!"

I counted six demons, and every single one was trying to get to me. They were so insistent they barely fought back when Laura or Julian tried to attack from behind, and my heart was starting to race. Why in the hell was I a target?

"Watch out!" Julian cried, his shotgun booming as he tried to get the attention of a demon that was advancing on me. Its head exploded like the last one, but two more took its place.

I was moving before I even realized what I was doing, slashing my blade across the chest of a demon. My blood boiled in anger because I wasn't some kind of damsel in distress that needed saving.

I kicked out with my left foot, catching a demon in the gut and knocking it backward, then spun to cut down another one. I saw Laura out of the corner of my eye, taking down a demon with her bowie knife, and Julian had dropped his shotgun and was using his machete to finish off the last two.

We'd done it. We'd managed to kill all six demons in a matter of minutes.

But why? Why had they come after me?

"Damnit," I said, wiping the ichor off my knives. "That was unexpected."

Laura walked over to me, cleaning her blade on her pants leg. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Why would they attack me like that? None of the others made a move to harm either of you."

Julian walked over to me, scowling at the demons. "They're definitely scouts, but I don't know why they didn't try to hurt me or Laura."

"Maybe we're not considered threats," Laura suggested. "But I've been fighting alongside Whitney for a long time and that's never happened before."

A terrible thought was starting to take shape in my head—our conversation from earlier, Julian talking about Faye's wolf-witch bloodline the reason why she was so desirable to the demons...

No. There was no way. I had so little that it barely mattered...

“You’re thinking,” Julian accused. “What are you thinking about?”

I glared, even as my heart was in my throat. The more I thought about it, the more sense it made. “I know this must be news to you, but most people are thinking ALL the time.”

Laura snorted out a laugh, and Julian shot her a look before turning to me. “What were you thinking about?”

“It’s just a theory,” I said, looking down at the bodies, stepping back as each one popped into balls of light.

“A theory about what?”

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly, looking at Laura for support. She nodded, gesturing with her hand for me to hurry up. “The reason why these demons came after me and not the two of you.”

“I’m listening,” Julian said, his jaw set. I knew he’d never be happy to hear this, but the sooner we had it out, the better off we would be. I could hear my blood pounding in my ears, and I’d broken out in a cold sweat—this was more terrifying than any demon fight. It had been something I’d been told to keep hidden my entire life, but if the demons really were after Faye and Sienna for being wolf witches, then it’d be more dangerous to keep my mouth shut.

“I…” I licked my lips, and swallowed, trying to relieve my suddenly dry mouth. “I’m a little bit of a witch. Like, I have enough magic that I can use small spells and charms, which is how I keep my blades spelled. My mother’s side of the family is human, but her great-grandmother was a powerful witch, and she passed some of that power down to me.”



Julian stared at me, his eyes wide and his face pale. “You’re a witch?”

“No, not really. I can do a few things, but I’m not strong enough to be considered a true witch.”

Julian took a step back from me, looking like he was going to be sick. “How long have you known?”

I almost laughed. “Is that a real question? My entire life, Julian.”

Laura was still watching the trees, but I knew she was listening to every word we said. Julian opened his mouth and then snapped it shut again, staring at me in disbelief. It would have been funny if we weren’t standing next to the bodies of demons we’d just killed, and I hadn’t just told one of my pack enemies my deepest secret.

“Your entire life,” he finally said, his voice quiet and flat. “You’ve always known.”

“Yes,” I said, putting my hands on my hips. I hated talking about my witch blood. I was raised to keep it a secret from everyone because it wasn’t enough to make me a true witch. All it did was put me in danger, especially as a demon slayer. No wolf wanted to get tangled up with a woman who might not live long enough to have a child, and the few drops of witch’s blood made me even less desirable.

Julian had a number of emotions cross across his face, but the last one left was anger. He was mad. No...he was furious. “You...you’ve been putting yourself in danger when you’re exactly what these demons are looking for? Have you lost your mind?”

My mouth dropped open in shock. “How dare you?” I hissed. “I’m not a child, Julian, and I don’t need you to tell me what to do.”

“It’s my job as your mate—”

“No,” I said, my voice a harsh whisper. “That’s where you’re wrong. You are not my mate, you are my enemy.”

Julian glared at me, and Laura stepped between us. “We should go back to camp,” she said. “There could be more coming, and we need to figure out what this all means.”

“Of course there could be more,” Julian snapped, stalking off toward the trail leading back to the campsite. “It’s only been a few hours since we found the first demon.”

I was going to kill him. No matter what, he was going to end up dead before this was all over. My blood was boiling as I stomped after him. Laura had to jog to keep up with us, and once we made it back to the SUV the drive back to camp was tense and silent.

“Do you really think there are more?” Laura asked when we made it back, looking at Julian.

“I’m positive,” he said, tossing his machete onto the table outside his cabin. “They knew we were here, and they came after Whitney. Whatever they’re planning, it involves her.”

Laura looked at me, her face pale. “Do you think they know about your bloodline?”

“That’s the only thing that makes sense,” I said, crossing my arms and looking down at the ground. I’d always hated the fact that I was a witch, even though it had barely been enough to call myself one. Most of the time I didn’t even bother. But now...now it might be what gets me killed. “Although I don’t know why they’d even bother...or how they found out in the first place.”

Julian was pacing again, his fists clenching and unclenching at his side. Finally, he stopped, pinching the bridge of his nose. “They have some sort of intel on all of our packs. That’s the only answer. That’s why they know Faye’s bloodline is important, and why they know you have witch blood.

“But how do they get this information?” Laura asked, glancing back and forth between us. “We’re in the middle of nowhere and demons aren’t exactly known for their communication skills. Unless...” She trailed off, and Julian and I both turned to her.

“Unless what?” I asked.

“Well,” she said, “The demons have seemed to be more powerful than the ones we’ve seen before. Right?”

“Yeah,” I said, nodding slowly as I started to understand where Laura was going with this. “We’ve seen a few that were definitely more advanced than the others. But that means—”

“That means they’re getting stronger. Smarter.” Julian finished. He looked angry and sick all at the same time, his hazel eyes boring into me like he was trying to lock me into place. “You’re in serious danger. We’ve got to perform the mating ritual. Tonight.”

I barked a laugh, shocked at his audacity. “You’re JOKING. You can’t be serious. I’m not doing shit with you, Julian. You’re insane.”

“No, I’m not joking,” he said. “And you have no choice. I’m not going to sit here and watch while you get torn apart by demons.”

I felt my lip curling up in a snarl and Laura stepped between us before I could say

something that I'd regret. "Okay, let's just take a minute here. No one's getting torn apart by anyone or anything else. The important thing is that we know what's happening. We know they're getting stronger, and we know that the demons are after witches and wolf-witch hybrids."

"So?" Julian asked. "How does that help us?"

"Because we can prepare," I said, looking past Laura's shoulder at Julian. He looked like he was about to lose his mind. "If the demons are getting stronger, we need to know how. There has to be something they're doing, and if we figure it out maybe we can stop them. We have to find out what they're planning."

"And how do you propose we do that?" he asked, crossing his arms and glowering at me. He was being an ass and I wanted to punch him in the face. "We just got back from finding their scouting party, and they came after you. It's pretty clear what they want." He pushed forward and grabbed my upper arm, his grip painful. "We have to perform the ritual. You'll be safer once I've bit you."

"Are you insane?" I hissed, yanking my arm away from him. "I'm not letting you bite me, you psycho! And even if I did, it wouldn't change anything. They'd still come after me!"

"It would at least put us on equal footing," he argued. "You'd have some of my power, and it'd be easier to keep you safe. I bite you, and then you go into hiding until this is all over."

"No," I growled. I'd been a demon slayer for a long time, and I'd fought some of the worst demons in the world, but I'd never met someone so pig-headed and arrogant in my entire life. "I am not mating with you, Julian Payne."

Julian ducked Laura trying to intercept him, and grabbed me by the shoulders. For the

first time, I found that I was a little afraid of him. He was huge, and so mad that his eyes looked like green fire. “Do you think I’m just going to sit back and watch you get killed? No. If you don’t agree, then I’ll force you,” he gave me a small shake, “For your own good.”

“You’ve lost it,” I whispered, pushing against his chest to try and get away from him. He had to be out of his mind to even consider forcing me into a mating. Wolves might do it all the time, but not me.

“No, I haven’t,” he said, shaking his head. “I’m finally starting to see clearly.”

“Well, I can’t say I agree,” I hissed, twisting in his grip. I pulled my knee up, aiming for his groin, but he dodged it at the last second.

“Knock it off!” Laura yelled, pushing between us. She’d pulled a knife, and Julian backed up, keeping his hands where she could see them. “Go back to our cabin, Whitney. I’ll make sure he can’t follow you. You both need to chill the fuck out.”

I wanted to push back, but if the positions were reversed, I’d be desperate for Laura to listen to me. So I stomped away, bristling as I felt Julian’s gaze on my back. Just before I was out of earshot I whipped around and yelled, “Even if you managed to force a mating, I’d run back to the Silverfangs the second it was done. Bite or not, I will NEVER be yours.”

“WHITNEY!”

I ignored his yell, reaching my cabin and slamming the door behind me. As soon as I was alone, I dropped my head into my hands, sank to my knees, and let the hot tears flow.

Damn Julian. Damn my blood. Damn it all.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:40 am*

I'd been able to keep all my worst behaviors in check when Whitney and Laura arrived and behaved like somewhat of a gentleman, showing them the cabins and the first spot where we had spotted the demons, even with everything in me screaming to claim her right then and there. Not seeing my mate for an entire week had been hell, but I had made it through knowing that I'd be seeing her again in a week, and in my own territory no less.

Everything had been fine until the demons had ambushed us, and all of them had turned toward Whitney, all but ignoring me and Laura. My plan had already been set into motion—I would lock her in her cabin that night and set guards outside of it, keeping her isolated and forcing her to get to know me until she relented and gave into the mating bond. But then that damn demon attack, and Whitney's confession combined to make her and I both lose our minds.

I wanted to rage and destroy everything around me, thinking that she had been out in the open with a target written on her back this whole time. What if she had been killed before we even met? What if the demons never stopped coming for her, now that they somehow knew she had witch's blood?

When she stormed off I yelled her name and made to follow her, but a hand had grabbed my arm from behind and stopped me. I snarled, whipping around to face whoever dared to stop me, but managed to control myself when I saw that it was Laura.

"Get off of me," I snapped.

"No," she said, not letting go of my arm. "You need to cool off before you go after

her, or else you're just going to make things worse."

I knew she was right, but that didn't stop the rage boiling up inside of me. Everything had been fine, until it wasn't.

How could she have kept that from me? For years, she'd been putting herself in danger when she was exactly what the demons were looking for. I wanted to shake her and scream at her, demanding that she never put herself in danger like that ever again.

"Let go of my arm," I said, turning to look at Laura.

She didn't let go. Instead, she tightened her grip, digging her nails into my skin. "Are you calm?"

I nodded, and she slowly loosened her grip, stepping back a little bit. "Good. You're not thinking straight, Julian."

I barked a laugh, shoving my hands through my hair. "How aren't you freaking out about this? I assume you were in the dark, too."

Laura didn't look bothered, though. "I didn't know about the witch blood thing, no, but I sort of suspected something was different about Whitney. She's been spelling our blades for years, and she'll give us satchels filled with crystals for protection during the more dangerous missions. But she didn't want to talk about it, and it was none of my business."

"She could have gotten herself killed," I muttered, pacing back and forth across the grass. "And she's still refusing to be my mate."

Laura rolled her eyes. "You've known her for all of two days, Julian. She isn't going

to fall into your arms at the first sign of danger.”

“You’re unmated. You don’t get it.”

“Maybe not fully, but I know Whitney. She cares for her team and her friends above all else, and she’d do anything for them. You’re not even trying to earn her trust to make a foundation. You just want her to be your mate without putting in any work. Your reputation fucking sucks, and there are multiple wolves who would kill you on sight if given the chance. Why would she want you as a mate?”

An acidic reply was on my tongue, but I held it back as I processed her words. She was right, I wasn’t going to waste time convincing my mate to be my fucking friend when she was in danger. I couldn’t force her to claim me as one of the people she cared about most, but one of those people was standing in front of me right now. Just like Laura said, Whitney would do anything to protect her.

Anything.

Laura was a demon hunter and a capable wolf all on her own, but I knew that Whitney was the major power on her team. Laura could hold her own against demons, but the more I thought about it, the more I thought that she’d stand no chance against five wolves...which is exactly how many Reckless Stalkers were left there while the rest were defending Silverfang Creek territory.

Whitney would do anything to protect Laura. And if Laura’s freedom could only be earned by completing the mating ritual with me...well. It was one hell of an idea, but if I fucked it up then I’d never see Whitney again, I was sure of it.

So I kept my expression neutral and pretended to mull over Laura’s words. “You think she’d change her tune if I fixed my reputation?” It was a pointless question, but I needed to lay the groundwork for the new plan I was working out in my head.



“No, dumbass, I think that’s one step of a million you need to take. Having some of your pack guard the Silverfangs is a good step, but it’s only been a few days. It might take YEARS for the damage you’ve done with Naomi and Danny to be worked through. Your pack is small and barely recognized, you’re known as a potential mate killer...I can’t even guess how you could turn that all around, but Whitney isn’t going to lower herself to your level.”

“Well,” I said, “Then what should I do?”

Laura sighed, rubbing the bridge of her nose. “Just give her some time to cool off. Go get something to eat, check in on the wolves who are still here, and make sure nothing else has gone wrong. We’re here for at least two weeks, right? So you have time to at least make her not pissed at you before we go home.”

She was right about one thing, I couldn’t just charge into Whitney’s cabin and demand that she mate with me, no matter how much I wanted to. My wolf was already pissed at me for not claiming our mate when we first saw her, and he was pissed again for having to wait now. But there was something I could do that would get us closer to what we wanted.

But Whitney wasn’t going home. She WAS home. She just didn’t know it yet.

“Alright. Look, I’m going to order pizzas for the pack that’s still here and I’ll get one for you and Whitney. Come to my cabin at 7 pm and pick it up if you’re hungry.”

“Okay,” Laura said, looking surprised that I was listening to her. “I’ll see you then. Thanks, Julian. For the pizza, I mean. You’re still a prick.”

“You’re welcome,” I said sarcastically, watching as she walked away. The instant she was out of sight I pulled out my phone and started texting, sending orders to the four wolves left behind from guard duty.

Me: Laura is getting food at my place at 7 tonight. It's going to be laced with sedatives. You all have two jobs. Grab her and keep her quiet once the sedatives have kicked in. You're going to have to store her away from the cabins so Whitney doesn't find her as soon as she wakes up. Then the rest of you need to find a witch that can perform a mating ceremony. Any witch that isn't affiliated with another pack will work.

Ethan: Yes, Alpha. But can we ask why?

Me: This is for Whitney. The demons are after her and the only way to keep her safe is to make her my mate. She'll do anything for Laura, including accepting me as her mate. I don't care what you have to do or who you have to kidnap, just make it happen.

I was putting a lot of trust in my wolves, which made my stomach clench when I remembered what Rick and Tanner had done to Naomi. I had told them to use a normal sedative, and those fucking morons had used wolfsbane. But that fuck up had gotten them kicked to the bottom of the pack hierarchy, and while my second, James was leading the first rotation of Silverfang Creek territory guards, Ethan was competent enough without the streak of cruelty that Rick and Tanner seemed to share.

With that thought, I pulled my phone back out and added a last message.

Me: Ethan, lead Laura's kidnapping. Claudio find the witch. Rick and Tanner answer to you two.

They all sent back a barrage of 'Yes, Boss' messages, and I was satisfied for the moment. I gripped my keys in my jeans pocket and looked longingly at my motorcycle. It would be nice to take a long ride to chill out, but I couldn't bring back pizzas on the back of a bike. So a long drive would have to do.

Feeling my anticipation growing, and the satisfaction of having a plan in place, I walked toward my old Jeep wearing a smirk. I hoped the girls had a nice few hours together because they were about to be separated—sooner rather than later.

\*\*\*

The next night

I spent the rest of last night and the following day preparing for the mating ritual and making sure that my wolves didn't fuck up the jobs I gave them.

The pizza portion went fine, which almost made me feel bad. Almost. Whitney and Laura trusted me enough to eat the food I provided, but I knew that wouldn't be the case anymore. Not after they got knocked out for hours on end.

I had the keys to all the cabins and Ethan had taken Tanner to snatch Laura out of her and Whitney's shared cabin. I considered just taking Whitney then, too, but I needed her to be alert and in good enough shape to actually go through with the ritual, not groggy and out of it, so it was better to let her wake up naturally.

Plus, the shock factor was something I was counting on. I wanted her pushed into a corner when she stumbled on my plan, and to make the decision to complete the ritual as quickly as possible. It wouldn't be easy to get the smart and quick-thinking Whitney to be impulsive, but I figured that having Laura hostage was my best chance.

Claudio had a harder time finding a witch on short notice, especially since he couldn't reach out to other pack witches for references. He'd had to go into town and skulk around a few occult shops and clubs to make some connections.

Finally, though, he found an unaffiliated witch named Erin who had the right skill set and agreed to do the job without asking too many questions. As long as she got paid,

she didn't care about the circumstances. Claudio picked her up and they met with me and the other two wolves at our rendezvous point—an abandoned barn a little ways outside of our ring of cabins.

It was still light out, but the sun would be setting soon and I wanted to have everything ready before then.

“Hey, Boss,” Claudio said as he pulled up in his truck. A pretty girl with a short blue pixie cut hopped out of the passenger side and looked at me with a mix of curiosity and distaste.

“Is this the place?” she asked. Her eyes kept darting to the barn and then back to the trees like she was waiting for something to jump out and grab her.

“Yes this is it,” I replied, putting on my most charming smile. “Erin, right?”

“That’s me. Claudio told me the basics, but you guys have a mating ceremony to perform, correct?”

“Yes,” I said, “And we’re very grateful that you agreed to do this. If you follow me, I can explain more of what I need done.”

I turned and headed into the barn, and Erin and Claudio followed. Claudio was at the witch’s back in case she tried to make a run for it once she saw what we had set up, and just as I expected, the witch stopped in her tracks once she spotted Laura.

Handcuffed with a bandana over her mouth, Laura was spitting mad, screaming obscenities past her bandana gag, which were muffled by the material. She was on the floor, hands behind her back, and a rope was tied around her legs, keeping her from standing.

I watched Erin's eyes go wide as she realized that she'd been hired for more than just a simple mating ceremony.

"Why is that woman tied up?" she asked, taking a step backward.

"Because she's my mate's best friend and will try to stop us from claiming each other," I replied simply. "Look, we have the money and we'll pay you what we agreed on. There's no reason for you to worry about this. This woman is in no real danger and my mate and I were matched in a mate match ceremony. It's all wolf shit, don't think about it too much. The quicker this gets done the quicker we can let this woman go."

Erin's eyes flicked back and forth between Laura, who was still screaming into her gag, and Claudio. Finally, she seemed to come to a decision. "Okay," she said with a nod. "Let's get started then."

We'd had to improvise a few things since Whitney would be unaware that this was a mating ritual until the very last second. In a normal mating ritual, the she-wolf would run toward a fire deep in the woods, and if her mate didn't catch her in time she would remain unmated but risked being shunned by the pack. It was usually all for show—the she-wolf would let herself be caught and the mating would commence. No one ever really wanted to make it to the fire.

I didn't think Whitney would aim for the fire, either, considering Laura's freedom depended on our mating, but just in case she changed her mind at the last minute we made sure to set the distant fire much farther away than usual.

Other traditions, like the doe masks, decoy she-wolves, and my mate being naked under her cloak also had to be thrown aside, but that was all just for show anyway. I had what I needed—a witch and a reason for Whitney to agree.

The sun was just starting to set when I heard the sound of booted feet sprinting through the woods. Whitney.

Ethan had sent a message from Laura's phone, explaining to Whitney where she was being held and that if she contacted her pack, then we'd kill Laura immediately. In order to keep her friend safe, the message said, she needed to come to the location alone.

Erin stood in front of a small fire, arms working as she muttered incantations, the magic of the mating ritual filling the air. My wolf was pacing beneath my skin, anxious to go hunt down his mate.

"How close are we?" I asked Erin, looking up at the sky to see how much daylight we had left. The sun would set soon, and the ceremony would be complete.

"Almost done," she replied. "I just need another minute."

I heard Whitney crashing through the trees and turned toward the sound, my heartbeat speeding up in anticipation. I heard the footsteps slow as she approached the clearing where we were all gathered, and then stop as she caught sight of us. Her blue eyes went wide and her mouth opened in a silent gasp as she spotted me first. She was dressed in her usual combat boots, jeans, and a black t-shirt, her hair pulled back into a ponytail. Her hands drifted to the blades strapped to each hip and she took a step backward, clearly ready to run.

"Ah-ah-ah," I said, shaking my head. "You better come here, or else I'll start carving up your little friend here."

Laura was still gagged and tied up on the ground, glaring daggers at all of us. Erin stood in front of a fire that had been built in a small metal basin, hands moving in intricate gestures as she chanted the incantation that would bind our souls

together—if I caught Whitney and completed the mating bite, that is.

“What is this?” Whitney asked, her voice hard as she looked at me, then the witch, then Laura. “Let her go!”

“Not until the ritual is complete,” I replied, shrugging. “So you have two choices. Agree to the mating ritual and then we’ll release your friend. Or don’t, and we’ll just kill her. I suppose you could try and fight, but—” I gestured to all my wolves around us. “We outnumber you.”

Whitney’s eyes narrowed, and I saw her jaw clench as she tried to figure out what to do. She’d been in plenty of situations where she had to make quick decisions about whether or not to fight, but I knew this was unlike anything she’d ever had to face before.

“You’d be fine knowing you forced the bond on me?” she gritted out between her teeth, rushing up until we were almost nose to nose. Her citrusy scent met my nose, her blue eyes flashing with hatred.

I didn’t let myself smile. She was making this too easy. “The bond is already there, we both know it. I can smell the way your body reacts to mine, and I can see that you want me, Whitney. The bite will just seal it all in place. The moment you agree we’ll free Laura. All you have to do is run.” I couldn’t hold back the grin anymore, “All I have to do is catch you. And I will catch you, Sweetheart.”

Her eyes fl”shed with rage as I called her sweetheart, and her hand came up lightning-fast, slapping me across the face. The sound echoed in the clearing, and it stung fiercely. “You might catch me, you fucking prick, but I will NEVER love you.”

Just in time, we all felt as Erin completed the spell and the magic of the ritual clicked into place, flooding the night air around us. “Make your choice, Whitney,” I told her,

her slap still burning on my cheek. It might make me fucked up, but her strike turned me on more than anything ever had before.

Her eyes flicked to Laura and she hesitated for a long second. She knew she didn't have a choice, but I saw her struggle against it anyway. It was just like her. Fierce and loyal to the end.

"Fine," she said after a moment. "Let her go and I'll go through with it."

"No," Laura screamed behind her gag, shaking her head as tears filled her eyes.

"Get her out of here," I told Claudio. He grabbed Laura's arm and lifted her roughly to her feet.

"If you hurt her," she whispered, turning to me with fire in her eyes, "I will kill you."

"Calm down, Sweetheart," I said with a grin. "Laura won't be hurt, as long as you stay true to your word. You run, and we release her. Easy."

A million emotions played over her beautiful face, the firelight painting her pale skin in colors like a sunset. Whitney didn't cry, but I could tell she was agonized. I briefly wished that it didn't have to be this way, but the slight guilt was eclipsed by the fact that I was about to complete the mating ritual. Finally, finally, she would be mine.

"I hate you," she said simply, undoing her blade belt and letting the weapons fall to the ground. "You might catch me, Julian Payne, but I'm not going to make it easy on you."

"I wouldn't expect anything less."

With that, she sucked in a shaky breath, turned, and took off into the woods. I gave



her the traditional ten count before taking off after her, my wolf snarling with excitement.

This was it. All I had to do was catch her. Catch Whitney, my mate, and make her mine.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:40 am*

I couldn't see the damned fire in the distance, and the magic of the mating ritual was so heavy in the air that my body was reacting even as my mind raged against the impossible position I'd been put into.

I would do anything for Laura, including sacrificing my freedom. But I wasn't about to make it easy on Julian. No matter how much I wanted to jump his bones and feel him inside me, I knew that giving in to the desire would be the biggest mistake of my life.

My body ached with want for him, though. The scent of him filled my nose and made my blood sing as I ran through the forest, but there was no way in hell that I could give in to it. Julian was bad news, a criminal, and now my worst enemy. He had hurt my friend, trapped her, and used her as bait. I'd killed people for less.

So why did the idea of him catching me make my heart pound?

It was the mating magic, I told myself, pushing aside the fantasies of Julian's strong body, his hands pinning mine down, and the look in his eyes when he saw me naked for the first time.

No, I couldn't let him catch me. No matter how badly my body wanted it.

The moon was full and bright, but the trees were tall and thick and blocked out much of the light, so I could see little in front of me. I had three options and they all sucked—reach the fire and potentially be shunned, even if the ritual had been forced on me, fight him, maybe even to the death, or let him catch me, fight, but eventually give in to the bite. Only the last one guaranteed Laura's freedom, but if I reached the

fire maybe I'd have time to circle back and rescue my friend.

But Julian would be expecting that. The forest seemed to go on forever, but I knew that there was no way I would reach the fire. Even if I was allowed to shift, I'd never be able to outrun the massive wolf behind me, and the change would zap a massive amount of my energy.

I heard his footfalls coming up behind me, and I put on another burst of speed, my heart hammering in my chest. My legs were already burning with exertion, and I'd lost my bearings long ago. I had no idea where Laura was being held, or even which direction I needed to run to get back to the cabins.

If I gave in to the mating bond, would I really be so much worse off than I was now? It wasn't as if my current position was ideal. I was living with the constant threat of death at my door. What if giving in to the bond meant more strength, more power, more ability to kill the demons and save my friends?

A mate bond would make me stronger and offer me more protection, there was no denying that. I'd receive some of Julian's power and strength through it, and even if he was a new Alpha, the boost would be significant.

Maybe it didn't have to be forever, maybe once the demon threat was handled Faye might be able to find some way to sever the ties—

Just then, Julian's hand clamped down on my shoulder, his fingers biting into my skin as he pulled me to a stop.

"Got you," he growled, pushing me up against a nearby tree.

I didn't hesitate. I lashed out with my fists, slamming my elbow into his side, but he blocked it, shoving me hard against the trunk. "Let me go!" I hissed, trying to wriggle

out of his grasp.

His breath was hot against my neck, and his hands went to the hem of my shirt, tearing it right down the middle. I kicked out, but he grabbed my leg and forced it down.

I twisted out of his grasp and spun away, my back slamming against the rough bark of another tree. “You don’t want this, Julian,” I warned him, my eyes scanning the ground for anything I could use as a weapon. “If you do this, we’re bound together for the rest of our lives. This is your last chance to back out.”

“I’ve never wanted anything more.” His voice was low and dark, the look in his eyes so hungry and feral that I felt my stomach flip-flop. He reached out and grabbed my wrist, yanking me against him so fast that I couldn’t stop myself from falling into his arms.

“Even if it makes me despise you?” I whispered, meeting his gaze. My heart was hammering in my chest, and my throat was dry, but my core ached with want. I could feel my panties growing damp as I pressed against his hard body, my breasts crushed against his chest.

“Even then,” he growled, grabbing the back of my neck and pulling my face up to meet his.

He kissed me hard, his tongue sliding between my lips to meet my own. I moaned as he grabbed my waist and lifted me, wrapping my legs around him. My fingers found their way into his hair, pulling him closer.

I needed him, wanted him, craved him, and no amount of telling myself that he was an enemy could override that.

The heat between us grew until it became a raging inferno, and we tore at each other's clothes, the mating magic making us both desperate with want.

His hands found their way under my bra, his thumbs brushing against my nipples until they were hard, and I bit back another moan. I couldn't give in too easily, even if he'd caught me.

With a growl, he threw me down on the ground and yanked my pants and boots off, followed by my panties. I looked up at him, aching to be filled, my skin burning to feel his touch on every inch of me.

"Tell me you don't want this," he said, dropping to his knees. "Tell me, and I'll stop."

My mind was racing. My body screamed for his attention, and I knew there was no way I could lie about it anymore.

"Don't stop," I whispered, reaching out to pull him closer.

That was all the invitation he needed. With a snarl, he jerked his shirt over his head and threw it to the side before making quick work of my bra. I was totally bare in front of him, and despite the frenzy, he seemed to freeze as he looked me over for the first time.

"Mine," he growled, running his hand down my side. "You're fucking mine."

"Yes," I replied, my hands reaching for the button of his jeans. For now, I added silently. Only for now.

He yanked off his pants, tossed them on top of his shirt, and then grabbed me, pulling me to him. The feel of our skin pressed together was electric, my head spinning with how quickly this was moving, and how easily hate transformed into lust.

His hands ran up my sides, over my breasts, and then grabbed my face, tilting it up to meet his gaze.

I sucked in a breath, but before I could say anything, he crushed his lips against mine, his tongue diving into my mouth. I groaned as his hands found their way into my hair, his fingers tightening against my scalp, and I arched against him.

“You’re mine,” he growled, biting my lip. “Say it.”

“Fuck you,” I hissed, biting him back. He laughed and jerked my head back, his teeth scraping down my neck, finding the sensitive spot where it met my shoulder.

I gasped as he sucked at my skin, so close to where he would bite me before the night was over.

“That’s right,” he said, his hand trailing down my stomach. “Tell me how much you want it.”

His fingers brushed against my clit, and sounds of appreciation escaped me before I could stop them. His touch felt so good. I didn’t feel the rough forest floor beneath me, or the chill of the night air. All I felt was Julian.

His fingers teased me for a moment, before sinking inside of me, and I sucked in a breath, arching into his hand. My eyes rolled back as he found that spot inside of me that drove me wild, his thumb working my clit in just the right way.

“Yes,” I whispered. “Oh gods, yes.”

He withdrew his fingers and sucked them clean, grinning at me. “You’re so wet for me. I love it.”

“Stop teasing me, you bastard,” I growled, grabbing his shoulders and pulling him toward me. “Do what you came here to do. Fuck me.”

Digging my hands into his biceps, I jerked him forward until he was on top of me, his cock poised at my entrance. I raised up on my elbows to really look at him, and the sight of his long, thick cock so close to being sheathed inside me had my pussy clenching. His breath caught at the sight too as I lifted my hips, trying to take him inside me.

“I’ve wanted this since the first moment I saw you,” he rumbled, grabbing my thighs and forcing my legs further apart. “You have no idea how many times I’ve touched myself thinking about this very moment. The moment when you’re under me, naked and begging me to fuck you.”

“I won’t beg,” I promised him, biting down on my lower lip. “I’ll make you work for it.”

“Then so be it,” he said, pressing himself against me. I felt his tip slide inside, and I cried out as he pulled out, then pushed in again, a little further. I ached to feel all of him inside me, but he only gave me small tastes.

He did it again, pulling out before thrusting in just a little deeper each time, until he finally sank all the way inside me with one swift motion.

“Fuck!” I cried out, back bowing. He felt so good inside me, his thick cock stretching me open, filling me up. His hips rolled against mine as he began to thrust, setting a slow and steady pace.

“You feel so perfect,” he murmured, leaning down to kiss my neck. “So fucking tight.”

I moaned as his pace quickened, my nails digging into his shoulders. I couldn't stop myself from bucking against him, desperate for more.

He reached between us, finding my clit and circling it with his thumb. "I caught you. You're mine, Whitney, and my prize is that pretty neck of yours. Let me bite you."

God, I wanted it too, although I couldn't bring myself to give voice to it. It had been so long since I'd felt the touch of a man, and the mating magic had taken away all my doubts. I knew there would be consequences, but right then, it didn't matter. All that mattered was that Julian made me feel things I hadn't known were possible.

My wolf howled inside me, begging to be claimed. The animal part of me wanted it just as badly as the human one did. It was as if the magic of the bond was pushing me toward him.

"Say yes," he growled, biting lightly at my neck, teasing me with his teeth.

"Fuck," I hissed, rolling my hips into his. My mind was hazy, but I knew this was a huge decision. One that I wouldn't be able to take back.

Julian's teeth scraped against my skin, making me shudder. "Say it. Tell me you're mine."

"Y-yes," I said, my voice trembling.

Julian pulled back, looking down at me, a smile on his face. "Say the words, Whitney. Say you're mine."

"I'm yours," I whispered, closing my eyes.

The moment the words left my mouth, I felt a sharp pain in my neck as Julian's teeth



broke the skin. I cried out as sensation flooded into my body, the bite burning like fire. My vision blurred as the bond formed between us, and I could feel his pleasure in my own body as he marked me.

He was claiming me as his mate, and I was helpless to stop it.

I was helpless to stop him from doing anything to me, I realized with a jolt. The magic of the bond was so strong that I couldn't fight against him, even if I wanted to. It was a terrible, awful power, one that I'd never wanted to experience, but there I was.

Bound to the enemy.

Julian lifted his head, licking my blood from his lips, and I gasped as the burning in my neck subsided and the bond solidified. It was like a heavy weight pressing down on me, an invisible chain that connected me to him.

I could feel him in the back of my mind, his emotions mixing with my own. Rage, desire, pride, and smug satisfaction. His emotions were so strong that it made me dizzy.

"How do you feel?" he asked, reaching down to stroke my hair.

"I hate you," I whispered, even as I moved with him, taking his slow thrusts and meeting each one. "I hate you."

"You're my mate." Julian's hand cupped my face, tilting it up so I would meet his gaze. His hips never stopped working, and I could feel myself climbing the peak with each movement. "And you're not going anywhere, no matter what you think you're feeling right now. You're mine, Whitney Gray, and nothing can change that."

“Shut up,” I hissed

His eyes hardened, but his thumb brushed across my lower lip, and the gesture sent a shudder through me. “Make me.”

I couldn’t help myself. I closed the distance between us and pressed my lips against his, my tongue sliding between his teeth. He groaned against my mouth, one hand wrapping around my wrists, pinning them down while the other went back to slowly run circles around my clit with his thumb.

I was so damn close.

“Julian,” I whispered, wrapping my legs around him like a snake.

He gave a low laugh, his teeth scraping against my neck. “Yes, Sweetheart?”

“I’m going to…”

“I know,” he murmured, his lips trailing up my neck. “I can feel it. Come for me. Come on, Love, let me hear you scream my name.”

I could feel my climax building, and I arched against him, my hips bucking as he drove me over the edge. My breath caught in my throat as I cried out, my body shuddering as waves of pleasure rolled over me.

Julian growled, his fingers digging into my hips as he slammed into me, his pace quickening as he chased his own release. I gasped as his teeth sank into my shoulder, my nails dragging down his back as another wave of pleasure crashed over me.

“Fuck, you feel so good,” he moaned, his voice low and raspy. “You’re mine, Whitney. Mine.”

“Yes,” I whispered, my hands sliding down to grab his ass, pulling him deeper inside me. “Yes, yes, yes.”

He gave one last thrust before I felt him tense, his cock pulsing inside me as he came with a groan. All remaining doubts were drowned out by another wave of pleasure as he spilled himself inside my pussy.

We lay there for a few moments, catching our breath, until he finally rolled off of me, pulling me against his chest.

“Mate,” he said, his voice low and husky.

I could feel the bond between us now, the magic that linked us together. It was like a warm glow in the back of my mind, and I knew that I could never be separated from Julian without feeling the ache of it. The bite was only the beginning of the ritual, and I hadn't given myself to him fully, but I knew now how easy it would be to do so. How good it would feel, at least in the moment.

Still, my heart ached as I felt him kiss the top of my head. This man had just changed everything about my life. He had taken away my freedom and forced me to become his mate, but the battle was not done. Julian would learn that one loss wasn't enough to bring me to bow.

But for the moment, I let myself bask in the afterglow of the mating ritual and rested. I would need my strength.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:40 am*

When the heat of our mating frenzy faded, things became tense again as Whitney and I gathered our undamaged clothes and started to head back to the cabins.

We walked in silence, neither of us sure what to say or do. I could feel the tension rolling off of my mate, and I knew she was angry with me, but there wasn't much I could do about it. The mating was done, and there was no changing it.

Still, I was sure she would be furious when she woke up in the morning and realized that she was bound to me for the rest of her life. She had fought so hard to prevent this very thing from happening, and now she was stuck with me.

"You're thinking too loud," she finally said, breaking the silence between us.

"Sorry," I muttered, glancing over at her. She was walking beside me, her arms crossed over her chest, a scowl on her face.

I couldn't help but smile a little. She was even more beautiful when she was angry, and she was definitely pissed off.

"Why are you smiling?" she asked, her voice low and dangerous.

I sighed and ran my hand through my hair, trying to gather my thoughts. "I'm not sure, if I'm being honest."

"Oh, I bet. You're definitely not cheering in your head about winning this little standoff I'm sure."

“No,” I admitted, glancing over at her. “It’s...you, I suppose. Even though you hate me and probably want to kill me right now, I’m happy that you’re here. I know it sounds crazy, but...it feels right. You feel right, even if you don’t believe it yet.”

Whitney let out a snort as we rounded the corner, approaching the front door of my cabin. “I don’t understand how you can say that. Don’t you realize how messed up this is?”

Her voice caught in her throat, and I reached out to put my arm around her, but she shook me off, scowling. “Don’t touch me,” she said, her voice cold as ice.

Fine. If she wanted to play it that way, so be it. I’d already gotten what I wanted, and she could stomp around for the rest of the night about it for all I cared. I knew there was no way she would leave me after what had happened between us, even if she was still trying to deny it.

“Look, Whitney, I know this is hard for you. It’s not easy for me either,” I said, opening the front door and stepping aside so she could walk past me into the cabin. “But it’s done. Now you’re safer and stronger. It’s not like you didn’t gain anything from this.”

“You have no idea what I gained or lost from this.”

I shut the door behind me and followed her into the kitchen, where she grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge and sat down at the table. She looked up at me, her expression unreadable. “I don’t know what story you’re telling yourself inside your head, but this changes almost nothing between us. I never planned on having a mate. I’ll use whatever extra strength I get from you, don’t get me wrong, but I’m still going to be a demon hunter. I resent the hell out of you.”

“And I’ve already told you,” I growled, reaching out to grab her face, forcing her to

look up at me, “Your fire is what makes you my perfect mate.”

“Stop saying that!” she hissed, jerking away from me. “I don’t care how you feel about me! Now that Laura is free, you’re just...a means to an end. Nothing more. My magic will be stronger now, and my senses. You’ve given me the tools I need to do my job better, and that’s all you are.”

“Bullshit,” I said, crossing my arms over my chest. “If that’s all I was, then you would’ve done everything you could to prevent this from happening. You wouldn’t have given in so easily.”

She scowled at me, “I did it to save Laura.”

“Maybe,” I said, shrugging. “But what about afterward? When we were alone in the woods? Did you fight me then, when we were both naked and vulnerable? No.”

Whitney’s cheeks flushed, and I knew I had her there. “Just...shut up. Please. It’s done and I want some time to unwind.”

“You’ll stay here tonight,” I told her matter of factly. “The mating ritual magic will make it almost painful for us to be apart this close to the mating.”

“I know,” she still sounded angry, but also tired. “I was raised in a pack too, you know.”

Feeling a little more confident that she wouldn’t run, I grabbed the takeout I had ordered for after the ritual, knowing that she would need calories after such exertion. I threw both containers into the microwave and brought them both to the table when they were finished.

Whitney jumped when I sat the food in front of her like she had been totally lost in

thought. I'd ordered two enormous servings of pasta with extra chicken for protein, and while I saw interest in her eyes, she stopped halfway from picking up the fork.

"Is this one laced with sedatives too?" she asked, her words full of acid.

I reached across the table with my fork and speared a bite of her chicken, and then a forkful of noodles, popping it into my mouth to show her that it was safe. "It's not. I'm not stupid enough to try the same trick twice."

"No," she said. "You're just stupid enough to think I'm going to stay here and let you keep me."

I smirked as she stabbed at her noodles, taking an angry bite. "I didn't expect you to let me. You'll come around in time."

Her scowl deepened. "I doubt that."

"We'll see." I knew better than to argue with her, so I dropped it. She was too tired to fight anyway, and she needed food if she wanted to heal faster.

Whitney ate in silence, her eyes fixed on the plate in front of her. I watched her as we ate, unable to keep my eyes off of her. Even though she was exhausted and filthy from the ritual, there was still a fire burning in her eyes, and I couldn't help but feel mesmerized by her.

She was my mate, and she would be mine forever.

"Stop looking at me like that," she said, glaring at me. "I'm not a piece of meat."

"No," I agreed, leaning back in my chair. "You're a beautiful woman, and my mate. I'm allowed to look."

She didn't respond with words, her mouth full, but flipped me off instead.

"You can have the bed tonight," I told her, pushing my empty plate away and standing up. "But it will be more comfortable for us if we share it. The mate ritual magic should be faded by tomorrow afternoon...but you're welcome to stay here with me as long as you want."

"Yeah, no. I'll be moving back to the other cabin with Laura."

"So you still intended to stay the full two weeks?"

Whitney rubbed her face, looking defeated. "Mating or not, the demon threat is still out there, and you weren't lying about the clues we might find around here. There's no point in letting this derail me any further. We'll get it done and go home. We'll deal with the mating stuff when it starts to become a problem."

I almost felt bad for her. As good as it felt to have her, I couldn't help but wonder how different things might have been if she had come to me willingly. My reputation will be even worse with the other packs if Whitney makes it public knowledge that I manipulated her to get the ritual finished, and she might always see me as a burden. It made me...sad. An odd thing to feel when I'd spent so much time being angry.

I could be a good man for her if given the chance. A good mate. But I just didn't see any avenues left for more chances.

"Look, Whitney. I know you're pissed with me, but we could really be good for each other. I've told you I won't try to stop you from doing your job or hold you down. What in the hell would it take for you to consider giving me the time of day?"

At first, I thought she would bite my head off again and tell me to fuck off. But maybe it was the leftover mate magic or her exhaustion, but she didn't immediately



balk. “It’s not happening. But let’s say that I was more open-minded in some other world where you weren’t a complete jackass...I guess the first step would be telling me what in the hell really went on with you and the Red Canines.”

“And by that you mean you want to know about Naomi, right?”

She patted her mouth with a napkin before taking a drink. “Well, yes, but I have a feeling there was a lot leading up to you having her poisoned. You’re the worst, but you’re not stupid.”

I pushed my now empty plate away and sighed. “I don’t like to talk about this shit.”

“You asked what it would take for me to consider your presence as anything but antagonistic. And this is the start.”

“Fine. But I don’t expect a Silverfang Creek to understand my point of view on anything. You all are so stuck up your own asses—” I caught myself before I dug the hole any deeper, but the anxiety was already growing inside me when talking about this with her. “Never mind. I don’t think you could despise me any more than you do right now, so let’s just get into it.”

“Good.” Whitney leaned back in her chair, and a hint of a smile was on her lips. “Before you get started, did you get any dessert?”

I almost laughed. Providing for her fulfilled some desire deep inside of me, but I didn’t want her to see I was taking any pleasure in it, considering she was doing everything possible to make me unhappy. “I did. Chocolate cake or cheesecake?”

“Cheesecake,” she said without hesitation. “And like, two bites of the chocolate cake too.”

I got up and grabbed the cake, placing both plates in front of her.

Whitney looked at the cake, then me, then the cake again. “You don’t want any?”

“I’ll take a bite of yours if you don’t want it.”

She narrowed her eyes and pulled the plate closer to herself, stabbing a large piece of the cheesecake with her fork. “Fine.”

“So...how do you want me to start? From when Danny and I were kids? The beginning?”

Whitney chewed for a moment, then nodded. “Yeah, if you know where the root of it all is.”

“It’s...complicated. There are a lot of factors.” I leaned forward in my seat, rubbing my face. “I mean, I can just give you the short version, but I think you would appreciate more of the history.”

“Just start talking, Julian,” she said, her tone flat. “I’ll decide what’s relevant.”

I let out a long sigh and began, knowing she wouldn’t be happy with any part of what I had to say. “Fine. So I’ll skip the shit with my parents, but basically, they dumped me with Peter when he was still the Alpha, and I grew up alongside Danny...”

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:40 am*

I had told Julian to tell me everything he deemed important to his history with the Red Canines, but he skimmed over his early life and only really began getting into detail when Naomi came around.

It was pretty much what I expected to hear, and while I wasn't surprised, I was a little disappointed. I guess I was still looking for some way to look at Julian in a better light, especially now that we had slept together and the sex had been mind-blowingly good.

He told me that he'd been thrilled for his best friend and Alpha when the news first broke that he had been matched at one of Faye's matching ceremonies, but Naomi wasn't what he expected. Danny had already been frustrated with how the pack had stagnated, and Naomi had only exacerbated that frustration. Not only that, but she had also been the catalyst for him to make a real change.

But to Julian, it was a betrayal to change the pack that had been his solace his entire life. Julian liked all the motorcycle gang activities and was one hell of a good drug and weapon runner. He couldn't imagine lowering himself to working some normal job to help fund the pack, losing all of the freedoms that he valued in the process.

Naomi represented the domesticated life that Julian had grown to despise, and when Danny began to agree with her more than Julian, his lifelong friend, it had sent him reeling.

He had left the pack to start the Reckless Stalkers but had held out hope that Danny would realize he'd made a mistake. That never happened, and he and Naomi had left Julian with no other choice. They had been the Red Canines since the beginning, and

if she wanted to be the reason he lost everything, then she was going to pay.

“So...you just had her poisoned?” I asked, raising an eyebrow at him.

Julian sighed and ran his hand through his hair. “It sounds bad when you say it like that.”

I couldn’t help letting out a humorless laugh. “Really? Because to me it sounds exactly like what it is. You ordered your lackeys to have her killed because you couldn’t handle that she was changing your pack into something different.”

Julian stood up suddenly, his chair clattering to the floor behind him as he glared at me. “I didn’t mean to have her killed, dammit! I meant for them to just knock her out. I did NOT order them to use wolfsbane.”

“How do you expect me to believe that?” I countered, standing up and facing him across the table. “You wanted her dead!”

“I didn’t!” he snapped, his voice rising. “You have no idea what it was like for me. She was ruining everything!”

I scoffed. “Everything? You’re kidding, right?”

His eyes were wild. “You don’t get it. I grew up in this pack. Danny was like my brother and our lives were good. And then that bitch came along and fucked everything up!”

I could feel my blood begin to boil, and I stepped around the table so I was standing directly in front of him. “You want me to believe that you only had her poisoned because she changed the pack and made Danny grow up? Your pride and arrogance are why you lost everything.”

Julian's eyes darkened and I could see the rage building in them. He was on the verge of losing his control.

"You don't know anything about me or what I've been through," he snarled, his hands curling into fists. "I would have done anything for Danny, but he decided that being some domesticated family man was more important than our way of life."

"Yeah, well, he got his priorities straight. I would rather have a friend who loves me than a friend who will try to kill my mate."

"I told you, it was an accident!" Julian bellowed, slamming his fist into the wall hard enough that the wood cracked. "I didn't mean for her to die! All I wanted was for him to realize what he was throwing away!"

His rage filled the cabin, but it took more than an angry wolf to intimidate me. I could feel his anger and sadness pouring down our bond, but I shut it out, whirling around to grab my shoes from beside the door. "I don't need to hear another word, Julian. I'm going on a walk. I'll be back when you're done throwing your temper tantrum. DON'T follow me."

"Don't you dare walk out that fucking door," he growled, taking a step toward me.

"Don't add being a controlling asshole to your already impressive repertoire of negative attributes, Julian. I won't go far."

He was practically shaking with rage, his hands clenched into fists at his sides, but I didn't give a shit. The last thing I wanted was to sit around and listen to his bullshit justifications. I'd heard plenty in the last two days, and I was already over it.

I needed some air, so I yanked open the front door and stormed out, slamming it behind me.

Outside the cabin, I could still feel his rage even through the thick walls and windows, but I ignored it as best as I could and started walking. I couldn't go too far because my body still felt sore and heavy from the mating ritual, but I needed to get away from Julian for a bit. I needed some space.

The night air was cool, a relief to my overheated skin. I could hear the gentle tinkling of water and followed the sound to a small pool. It was formed naturally from a crack between two large boulders, and it seemed deep enough to be refreshing. I was tired and sore, but I was covered in sweat and dirt and really needed to wash up.

I stripped off my clothes and waded into the water, sighing in pleasure as I submerged myself fully. It was refreshing but retained some of the heat from the daytime sun, and my muscles were already feeling better.

I took my time washing up, scrubbing the sweat and dirt from my skin, then dunked my head under the water to wash my hair. The water was surprisingly clear, and I could see my feet if I looked down. I washed my hair twice, wanting to get rid of the sticky feeling it always had after I used magic. I knew the feeling would go away in a day or two, but until then I would be stuck with it.

A ripple in the water caught my eye, and I turned to see an enormous fish swimming past me. I watched in fascination as it swam by, surprised by how close it came to me before it changed directions and swam away.

I stood up, running my fingers through my hair to squeeze out some of the excess water, and was about to turn back toward the cabin when a familiar scent reached my nose.

"You look like a water spirit," Julian said, his voice low. "But you smell like mine."

I turned to face him, crossing my arms to cover my breasts. It's not like he hadn't

seen them already, but still. “I told you not to follow me.”

Julian didn’t even have the good sense to look guilty, his gaze roving over my bare body appreciatively. “I can’t help it. I want to be with you.”

I couldn’t help but feel a little pleased with how blatant he was in his attraction to me. It felt good to be wanted. “Look, I know that’s part of the magic and all, but could you give it a rest? I don’t want you following me around like a lost puppy.”

Julian’s gaze lifted to meet mine, and I saw something dark flicker in his eyes. He looked angry again, but it wasn’t at me.

It was at himself.

“Look. I was an asshole back there. I stand by what I said but I shouldn’t have gotten loud with you.” He sat on the edge of the pool, and I realized he was barefoot as he let his feet drift in the water. “Can I, uh, explain myself a little more? But as a conversation. I want to listen to you this time.”

I eyed him suspiciously. “Why are you suddenly being nice?”

He let out a long sigh, looking up at the sky. “I’m not trying to be nice. I’m just trying to show you that I’m not all bad. We’re bonded now, and I need you to believe me when I say that I don’t regret it. If you’d come to me willingly, I would have treated you like the goddess that you are. I would have taken care of you. But this is what we have and I need to figure out how to work with it.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked, frowning at him. “I haven’t been a bitch to you because of your reputation, I’ve been a bitch to you because you are a bitch.”

Julian laughed softly. “No, that’s fair. I get that. But I can’t help but think that maybe

if I had been different, I could have had a real shot with you.”

“That’s not—”

He held up his hand. “I’m not trying to get you to fall in love with me. I’m just trying to tell you that I’m not an asshole because I like being one. I’ve had my fair share of heartbreak. And now, I have another person that hates me and wants nothing to do with me. So I guess I’m just trying to explain why I’m so angry all the time.”

I felt bad, but I tried to shake the feeling away. I was still pissed with him. “That’s not an excuse to be a dick.”

Julian sighed again, looking out over the water. “Yeah, I know. I don’t think I can change overnight. But I can try to do better. If we’re going to be stuck together, then we might as well at least try to get along. At the very least, I’d like us to be friends.”

I was stunned. I wasn’t expecting him to try and be friendly, but I was surprised by how much it meant to me. Maybe it was the bond working, or maybe I was just ready to call a truce, but I wanted him to try.

“If you want to be my friend, then you have to respect me. I don’t care if we’re mated or not, I’m still a person with feelings and needs. I have no desire to be some submissive little housewife who hangs on your every word.”

Julian turned his head to look at me, his eyes roaming over my body, and I could see the lust in his gaze. “I don’t want you to be submissive, Whitney. I just want you.”

His words sent a shiver through me, and I could feel myself growing hot. “Fine. Say your piece and I’ll listen. But you have to answer any questions I might have honestly, and the second you get angry we’re done here.”



“I can do that. But why don’t you come out of the water?”

I crossed my arms over my breasts, covering them. “No. It’s nice here. Deal with it or leave.”

“You drive a hard bargain. But alright,” Julian leaned back on his elbows, watching me. “But if I lose track, it’s because you’re naked, so it’s your fault.”

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:40 am*

This time I didn't cut out the painful parts. When she had first asked back at the cabin I'd glossed over the stuff that hurt me the most and focused in on what led to all my current problems—Danny and Naomi.

But when Whitney stormed off I realized that she wasn't asking me to rehash what she already knew. Because she was already aware that I hated Naomi and what she had done to Danny, and how that had been the catalyst for the poisoning.

What Whitney wanted from me was to know what had formed me into the man that I am, and if there was any room for understanding between us.

I told her about my parents and their abandonment of me as a child, but also told her how I had met Peter, and how he and Danny had become my new family.

It was easier to talk to her this time, and while she still seemed skeptical about everything I was saying, she listened to me without any interruptions, letting me tell my story.

She was still naked, and I tried hard not to let myself get distracted by her body, but it was difficult. Her pale skin was glistening from the water, and her nipples were hard from the cool air. I wanted nothing more than to wrap my arms around her and hold her close, but I knew she wouldn't welcome it.

“So your parents are still in jail?”

“Yeah.” It was a source of embarrassment for me, and I hated talking about it, but if it was going to make her understand me better, then I would endure it. “They're up for

parole in a couple of years, but they'll never be able to get out. Some of the drugs that were caught with had killed someone and there was a lot of evidence, so there's no chance of them ever walking free again."

"Do you still go visit them?"

"I did at first," I admitted. "But then I realized that they only wanted me to come because they needed me to help them get out. They weren't really interested in being parents."

"Huh. Well, I guess that explains why you're so attached to Danny. He really was like your brother. But that also makes what you did to his mate that much worse, you know?"

"I'm all too aware of that," I sighed. "But again, I never met to cause her permanent harm. I just wanted Danny to see that she was a weak point in the pack. The two wolves I sent to do the job fucked it all up."

"But if it had gone as planned, would you regret it now?"

I shook my head. "No. Danny and I might be at each other's throats, but I still care about my old pack."

Whitney swims in a lazy circle, her moonlight hair dragging behind her in the water. "If you cared that much you wouldn't have left."

It was a fight to push my anger down, but I managed. I wanted to prove to her that I could have these hard conversations. "What Danny has turned the Red Canines into is a mockery of what we once were. All of my money, my old apartment, and all of the respect I ever earned was through our old ways. Crime and even violence came naturally to me. What place would I have in a pack that disregarded all of that work I

did?" I scoffed, working my jaw to get rid of some of the tension inside of me. "Every good thing I've ever had in my life I earned through the pack the way it used to be."

My mate paused, looking at me with those huge, icy blue eyes. "Do you consider me a good thing?"

I blinked at her, surprised at the question. "Yes, absolutely."

She swam closer to me, coming to stand just a foot away from me, and I could see the sadness in her eyes. "Well, I didn't come from all that crime and violence, did I? So there's one good thing that didn't come from you being a criminal."

I stared down at her, trying to think of the right words. She was so close to me, naked and wet and smelling like heaven. My wolf was howling for me to pull her into my arms, but I knew that wasn't going to work. I had to use my words.

"Whitney, I didn't mean to imply that you weren't worth the bad shit in my life," I said, reaching out to touch her cheek. She didn't move away, her eyes on mine. "I'm just saying that it was easier when everything was black and white. Before, I always knew what I wanted out of life, but now everything is complicated. I don't know what to do anymore."

She tilted her head, finally pushing herself backward in the water so my fingers fell away from her skin. "I can tell you this—you had to be a strong wolf to catch me, Julian, but you'll have to be a good man to have any chance of keeping me."

"And if I'm not a good man?"

Her expression softened and she looked at me, her eyes searching mine. "Kidnapping Laura certainly didn't earn you any points with me in that regard. But—" she held up

a hand when I opened my mouth to speak, stopping me. “I’m all too familiar with male werewolf mate nonsense. Danny kidnapped Naomi, I should have been more on guard that you’d do something similar. I don’t approve, and I’ll rip your throat out if you touch her again, but I also know we aren’t human. We’re wolves.”

I leaned forward, watching her closely. “You’re being awfully forgiving for someone who just tried to kill me. What’s changed?”

Whitney gave a little shrug, looking down at the water as she swam another circle around me. “You explained yourself.”

“What about the fact that I kidnapped Laura?”

She smiled and I could see her sharp teeth flashing in the moonlight. “I have a feeling she’ll make you pay for that all on her own.”

I let out a huff of a laugh. “No doubt.”

Whitney swallowed, trailing her fingers through the water. “It doesn’t have to be this way for you and your pack, you know. The best Alphas are good men, Julian. If you want this pack to thrive you’ve got to change.”

“I don’t know how to be anyone else besides who I am. A low life. A criminal.”

“Danny changed, and took a much larger pack than yours with him, changing all of them for the better.” We were silent for a moment, and then she turned to look at me again. “Did you mean what you said back at the cabin? About wanting this mating to be real?”

I nodded slowly, holding her gaze. “Yes. I’ve wanted you since I saw you.”

“Even when you thought I was going to kill you?”

I chuckled softly. “Even then. You’re a force of nature, Whitney. How could I not want you?”

Her cheeks pinkened and she looked away, and I felt a surge of pride at having made her blush. It was a good look on her. “I—okay. Thanks, I think.” It took her a few minutes to regain her composure, but when she did, she met my eyes once more. “I’m heading back to the cabin to sleep. You can walk with me if you’d like, but I think I’ve had enough serious talk for the night.”

“I’ll walk you,” I said, standing up and stretching. The moonlight hit her body as she stepped out of the water, water sluicing off of her as she shook herself slightly, and I couldn’t help but admire her. She was gorgeous, and I was lucky that she was my mate.

“Don’t get any ideas,” she said over her shoulder, and I grinned.

“I can’t help it. You’re beautiful.”

She rolled her eyes at me, but I could see her lips twitching into a smile. “Come on, let’s get back to the cabin. I need some sleep.”

We walked in silence back to the cabin, and I opened the door for her, letting her walk inside first.

“Thank you,” she murmured, brushing past me to head into the bedroom. I followed her, wanting to be close to her. I didn’t like being away from her. That ended when she slammed the bathroom door in my face and came out a handful of minutes later smelling like my soap and wrapped in a towel.

Without a word I gave her some clothes to sleep in, my wolf finding contentment in seeing her wearing my things and smelling like me. She climbed into bed, pulled the covers up over herself, and closed her eyes.

I stood there for a moment, waiting for her to say something, but she didn't. Her breathing slowed and evened out, and I knew she was asleep.

It had been a long day and I was exhausted, but I couldn't sleep just yet. I was too keyed up after everything that had happened, and my wolf was anxious and restless. I needed to shift and run.

I padded silently through the living room and kitchen to the front door, glancing at the bedroom where my mate slept peacefully. My mate. I didn't want to leave her, but I also knew she needed some space. And so did I.

I slipped outside and let myself change, enjoying the way my muscles stretched and bones popped as I shifted. It was a relief to be in my wolf form, and I felt more at peace. It would help calm my mind and give me a chance to think without the added emotions of the bond muddying things up.

I took off at a lope, enjoying the cool night air on my face and the way the forest smelled of pine and earth. The moon was bright overhead, lighting my way as I ran, and it made me feel free.

When I finally climbed into the bed beside her hours later, showered and on the verge of falling asleep on my feet, Whitney didn't even stir. Her words came back to me as I drifted off, and even though it went against everything I had founded the Reckless Stalkers for, I couldn't help but wonder...what if she was right?

What if I really was destined for more than being a criminal? What if there was a way to find respect among my fellow wolves once more?

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:40 am*

The next few days didn't feel as different as I thought they would, despite being officially mated to Julian Payne, Alpha of the Reckless Stalkers.

The morning after the mating ritual, I left Julian in bed and went back to the cabin that Laura and I were supposed to be sharing. She was there, unharmed as promised, and threw herself into my arms, crying and asking if I was okay.

"I'm fine," I said, hugging her tightly and taking comfort in her scent. "He didn't hurt me."

"I was so scared for you," Laura cried, her arms tightening around me. "I can't believe this happened."

"I know, Laura," I soothed, rubbing her back. "It's okay. Everything is going to be okay."

But was it really? Was everything going to be okay? I had a feeling that everything was about to change.

She had a million questions for me and I told her everything. There was no point in holding back now. I thought she'd run out of the cabin and kill Julian with her bare hands at first, but she relaxed a little when I admitted that I had consented to the mating at the very last minute. It made my cheeks burn with embarrassment to tell her, but I wanted everything to be crystal clear between Laura and me from here on out.

No secrets. No lies. No omissions.



“He’s a piece of shit,” Laura growled, her face red with anger. “I can’t believe he did this to you.”

“It was a shitty situation,” I said, sitting down on the couch and patting the seat next to me. “But we’re stuck with each other for the time being, so I have to tolerate him. Plus, being mated to him has given me a little strength boost.”

“You’re being awfully cool about this.”

“I have to be. There’s no use getting upset over it. What’s done is done.”

Laura let out another frustrated sound, then sighed and sat down beside me. “You’re right, of course. I’m just angry that he did this to you.”

“We’ll figure something out,” I said, smiling at her and reaching over to squeeze her hand. “Everything will be fine, Laura. It will work out.”

She didn’t look convinced, but she squeezed my hand back. “Okay, I trust you. But if he gets out of line, just let me know and I’ll kick his ass.”

I couldn’t help but laugh, and I pulled her into a hug. “Thanks, Laura. You’re the best. And I’m so fucking sorry they kidnapped you like that.”

Laura hugged me back, sighing softly. “I’m just glad you’re okay. How are you holding up?”

I pulled back, meeting her eyes. “Fine. I mean, he’s my mate, so everything worked out in the end. I just don’t know what will happen now.”

“Now we figure this out together. This is going to be okay, Whitney,” she said, nodding decisively. “You deserve to be happy.”

“So do you,” I said, leaning forward to touch her face gently. “Are you okay? Did they hurt you?”

She shook her head. “No, I’m fine. They were all so busy trying to figure out their next move that they didn’t pay much attention to me.”

“I’m so glad.”

Laura pulled away and smiled at me. “They gave me some food and water, and I managed to get a good night’s sleep. So don’t worry about me. What matters is how you’re doing.”

“I’m okay. It was pretty intense, but...” I let out a soft huff of a laugh and shook my head. “Well, you know how these mating things go. It wasn’t so bad. We just talked most of the night.”

Her eyes widened, and she blinked at me a few times. “You talked? The whole time?”

“Most of it, yeah.” I cleared my throat, feeling my cheeks heating up. “He was surprisingly...open. It was a good conversation.”

“Well fuck,” Laura muttered, shaking her head. “I don’t know what to say. I was expecting you to be traumatized and tell me that he’s a brute.”

“No, not at all.” I reached up, brushing a strand of my hair out of my face. “I think we’re going to be fine.”

“That’s good to hear, but I still don’t trust him as far as I can throw him.”

“Well, I’ll take care of him if he does anything stupid, don’t worry.” I stood up,

stretching and letting out a loud sigh. “Now, I don’t know about you, but I’m starving.”

\*\*\*

Julian was the obvious enemy, but Laura and I found a secondary villain in the witch that the Reckless Stalkers had hired to perform the mating ritual.

When we left the cabin after lunch and spotted her out in the open, the blue-haired witch had frozen in her tracks, looking terrified. Laura snarled beside me, and I was sure she was going to shift right then and there.

“Not so tough now that I’m not tied up, huh?” she yelled, taking off after the witch. The woman yelped and ran in the opposite direction, and I grabbed Laura by the arm, stopping her.

“Laura, don’t. There has to be some reason that she’s still here.”

“There is,” a deep, familiar voice said from behind. I turned to see Julian, looking well-rested but understandably wary when he looked Laura’s way. “I found out she’s basically homeless and offered her one of the empty cabins if she agreed to train you in return.”

“Train me?” I echoed, not understanding.

“In witchcraft,” he clarified. “If you’re going to be running around all over the place with a target on your back, you might as well know how to use your power to the best of your abilities.”

“How do you know she’s even capable of training me?” I asked, curious. “She really agreed to do it knowing that I have barely any witch blood?”

Julian nodded his head, glancing over my shoulder at Laura before looking at me. “Yes, and I believe her. She just wants a safe place to stay.”

“So do we,” Laura snapped, taking a step forward. “Which you haven’t exactly provided so far.”

Julian met her eyes, and I saw his jaw tic slightly. “I know you don’t trust me, Laura, but I want you to know that you’re free to go whenever you want. If you leave, I’ll make sure the other pack members won’t bother you or follow you.” He turned back to me. “Just give it a chance, Whitney. You don’t lose anything by trying.”

“Fine. I’ll let her ‘train’ me, but in return I want you to leave us alone unless it’s about the demons.”

He frowned, looking displeased, but nodded. “That’s fair. I’ll leave you alone for now.”

I turned to Laura and arched my eyebrows at her, and she looked unhappy but sighed. “Okay. Thank you for your hospitality.”

Julian smiled slightly. “Of course. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a pack to run.”

He walked off without another word, and Laura sighed loudly. “I really don’t like him. There’s something shifty about him.”

“You think everything is shifty...but yeah, I agree,” I said with a laugh. “Come on, let’s see what this witch can teach me. It might be fun.”

\*\*\*

It was harder for Julian to give us space than I originally thought, and when it became

clear that I wasn't going to stay in his cabin with him, he became broody and grumpy. I don't know when I gave him any indication we would be acting like true mates now, but hope springs eternal, I guess, I thought to myself.

Two days later, Julian announced that he had to leave the cabins for a night to complete a big weapons delivery, and while it left a sour taste in my mouth, I didn't complain. It wasn't like I expected him to quit his job immediately.

Training with Erin was going about as well as my new mating—which is to say it sucked. Erin was young and while she clearly had some talent, she was also an amateur and had never trained anyone before.

The day Julian left, things came to a head. I was in Erin's cabin while Laura read a book, sitting against a wall. She refused to leave my side now, even for my admittedly boring witch training.

I hated to admit that Julian was on to something because even with how amateur Erin was, I could feel a connection with the magic she tried to teach me that was a lot stronger than I expected. But still, it felt just out of my reach, and after three hours of trying to get me to meditate, Laura and I had both had enough.

"Let's call it quits for today," she said, giving me a sympathetic look when I winced and rubbed my temple. "I think you've got enough of a headache without this."

"Yeah, okay," I muttered, standing up slowly. My head swam and I felt nauseous. What was wrong with me?

"Maybe tomorrow will be better," she said, trying to be encouraging. "I'm sure you just need more practice."

I tried to smile, but I felt too sick to bother. "Sure, maybe."

Laura sighed softly. “You go lie down, I’ll make you some food.”

I nodded and headed back to the cabin, letting myself inside and plopping down on the couch. I felt so exhausted, even though all I’d done was sit on my ass and try to focus my power. It had been almost impossible. I could feel it bubbling up under the surface, but I couldn’t grasp it and use it like Erin did.

The thought of food made my stomach turn, and I sighed softly and closed my eyes. I knew I should eat, but I was afraid I’d puke it all back up. Maybe I was sick.

I didn’t remember falling asleep, but I must have dozed off because I woke to Laura shaking my shoulder gently.

“Whit? You okay?” she asked, peering down at me with a worried expression.

I blinked slowly, then sat up and smiled at her. “Yeah, fine. What’s up?”

“I brought you some dinner.” She held up a plate of pasta and a cup of broth. “And some medicine, if you want.”

“Thank you,” I said, accepting the food and setting it on my lap. My stomach turned over just looking at it, but I hadn’t eaten for hours, and I knew I needed to try.

“How are you feeling?” Laura asked, sitting down beside me and pulling her knees up to her chest.

“Fine,” I lied, forcing myself to take a bite of pasta. I swallowed it down, ignoring my body’s protest. “This is good. Thank you.”

She smiled, shaking her head. “You don’t have to lie to me, Whit. I know you’re feeling like shit. And I don’t blame you. You’ve been through a lot in the last week.”

I nodded, taking another bite of the pasta. “True, but I usually bounce back faster than this.”

“Heavy magic is new. I bet it’s draining. Why don’t you just go lie down for the night?”

“I’ll be okay, really.” I swallowed down the pasta and took a sip of the broth, letting it soothe my throat and stomach. “I’m fine, Laura. I’m sure it’s just because of all the stress. It’s been a lot.”

“I know,” she said, sighing softly. “I’m so sorry I wasn’t there to stop it.”

We ate in silence, the mood heavier than either of us wanted it to be. I was ready to get back to hunting demons, not just sitting around trying to be something I wasn’t and waiting for Julian to return.

With my stomach calmed for the moment, I helped Laura clean up. We returned to the couch to watch a movie, but after I fell asleep before the halfway mark, I gave up and went to bed for the night.

My sleep was restless. I tossed and turned all night, plagued by dreams of demons, and waking up sweating and crying.

Laura slept on the pull-out couch in the living room, and when I finally woke up she had already made us breakfast and was curled up on the couch with a book.

“You’re awake,” she said, smiling at me. “How did you sleep?”

“Terribly,” I admitted, standing up slowly. I rubbed my stomach, which felt tight and bloated.

Laura frowned at me, her brows pulling together. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’ll be fine.” I shook my head and smiled at her. “It’s just the stress, like I said.”

“Maybe you need a day off? Just relax and take a break from training? You could use a little R&R.”

I sighed, walking over to the couch and sitting down beside her. “I know you’re probably right, but we have to get this demon situation under control. People are dying. I don’t want to be the one responsible for that happening.”

“I know, but you can’t keep pushing yourself like this, Whit. It’s not good for you.”

“I’m good,” I said, sighing softly. “I just need some breakfast. Did you save any for me?”

“Yeah, of course.” She stood up. “Go sit down. I’ll bring it to you.”

I did as she asked, letting her take care of me. She had always been protective of me since we were little, and it was nice to be cared for. I was so used to being the strong one, the one who looked out for everyone else, that it was a nice change of pace.

Laura brought over a plate of waffles, along with a small bowl of fruit and a cup of tea. “This will help your stomach,” she said, setting the tea in front of me. “And eat slowly. You don’t want to make yourself sick.”

“Yes, Mom,” I said, grinning at her and digging into my waffles. I took her advice though, and ate them slowly, letting them settle.

It should have worked, but after a few forkfuls, my stomach started to turn even more



violently than before. I jumped out of my seat, clamping my hand over my mouth and running to the bathroom where I vomited up my breakfast.

“What’s wrong!?” Laura asked, coming in and kneeling down beside me. She grabbed my hair, pulling it away from my face and rubbing my back soothingly.

I vomited again and then flushed the toilet, leaning back against the wall and groaning softly. “I don’t know what’s going on with me.”

“I think I have an idea,” she said gently, “But we can talk about it when you’re feeling better. Why don’t you brush your teeth and take a shower? Maybe you’ll feel better after that?”

I nodded, standing up slowly. “Yeah, okay. That sounds nice.”

She smiled, then turned and walked out of the bathroom, closing the door behind her.

I did as Laura suggested, letting the hot water soothe me as much as it could. I felt a little better after my shower, but the nausea had returned full force and I was sweating again. My whole body ached, and I was ready to climb back into bed and sleep until this was over.

I got dressed and pulled my damp hair into a braid, then headed into the living room to talk to Laura. She looked up at me from the couch and frowned, setting down her book.

“You look worse,” she said, shaking her head.

“I feel worse,” I admitted, sitting down beside her on the couch. “I’m just going to get some more rest, and I’ll be fine.”

“Actually, I think we should go into town. I have a suspicion about what’s going on.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked, frowning at her.

My friend looked troubled, but she put on a happy face for me. “We’ll talk about it when we get there. Grab a soda out of the fridge for the ride, it might settle your stomach.”

I let Laura drive, sipping my cold drink and staring out the window at the scenery, trying to ignore how much the dirt roads were making the car jolt. When we made it into town, Laura pulled immediately into a drug store parking lot and marched us to the family planning aisle, where she shoved a box of pregnancy tests into my hands.

I looked down at the box, and then back up at her, a cold flush of nerves coming over me. “No way. It was only a few nights ago and—”

“And we’re werewolves,” she pointed out. “We test positive almost immediately, remember? Something about stronger hormones and all.” She took the box out of my hands, ripped it open, and handed me a test. “Here. Go to the bathroom and pee on this while I go pay for them.”

“Fine,” I grumbled, taking the test and walking to the back of the store.

I peed on the stick as she instructed, and then set it on the counter in front of the mirror and washed my hands. I turned to stare at it, my stomach twisting in a knot. What if it was positive? I couldn’t have a baby. I didn’t want one, and especially not now, with the world literally going to hell in a handbasket.

Letting Julian bite me was a necessary evil, but having his baby was out of the question.

The test still had time to develop, but I could already see the little pink plus sign forming. I closed my eyes and leaned forward, resting my hands on either side of the sink and letting out a slow breath.

Laura knocked on the door, and I snapped out of my mini panic attack. “What?”

“You okay?” she called, her voice muffled by the wood.

“Yeah, it’s just...it’s positive.”

There was a moment of silence, and then she cleared her throat. “Okay, well. That’s what we expected, right? Don’t worry Whit, it’ll be okay. You know you’re not alone here.”

I nodded, even though she couldn’t see me. “Yeah, I know. Thank you.” I picked up the test and tucked it into my pocket before leaving the bathroom.

Laura was waiting for me at the front counter, looking worried. She smiled at me, but I could see the concern in her eyes. “It’s going to be okay,” she promised, stepping forward and giving me a quick hug.

I forced myself to not cry. “Of course it will. Let’s get out of here.”

I followed her outside, letting out a slow breath. This changed everything, but I wasn’t going to let it ruin my life. I’d figure this out, just like I figured everything else out.

“We’ll go to the next town over and see a doctor there,” Laura said, getting into the car and buckling up.

I got in the passenger seat, strapping in. “What? Why? The pack healer is just fine.”

“Because you need to know how far along you are, and a doctor can tell us that. Plus, I bet they’ll have something to help with your morning sickness.”

I sighed softly. “I’m sure I’ll be fine. Let’s just get back to the cabins so I can...I don’t know. Wallow in my self-pity.”

“Don’t be so dramatic. A quick trip to the urgent care clinic, we’ll get you some nausea meds, and then head back to the cabins. It will give you some time to figure out how to tell Julian—”

“No!” I snapped, whipping to face her. “We are NOT telling Julian.”

Laura frowned at me. “Whitney...if you don’t want to tell him, I get it. He’s horrible. But if you want to keep this a secret we need to get back to Silverfang Creek territory as soon as possible.”

I sighed, rubbing my temples. "I know, but I just...can't deal with that right now, okay? Please, Laura?"

"Of course. We won't say anything about this for now. But eventually, he's going to notice that you're pregnant."

"I know, I just...need a little time to think."

She nodded. "Okay, let's go." She reached over and took my hand, squeezing it. "You've got this, I promise."

I returned her smile, but it was just for show.

I really wished I could believe her.

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:40 am*

When I returned from the delivery—a massive load of guns—I was immediately on edge that Whitney wasn't at the cabins. I'd had my wolves reporting back to me about her location, what she was doing, and anything else that might be important while I was gone. But after looking into her cabin and seeing that all of her and Laura's things were still there I relaxed and decided to use the time she was away to convene with my pack.

We hadn't gotten a chance to really talk since Whitney arrived, especially with half of the pack gone on the Silverfang Creek patrols. I didn't look forward to having to have the meeting a second time when the patrols switched out, but I supposed that was one of the downsides of being an Alpha—doing things over and over again.

I needed to discuss the future of the pack with them now that I had a mate. A no-name she-wolf from any other pack wouldn't change things much, but the Silverfang's head demon hunter? Whitney's presence was going to shake things up, so I had to get ahead of things and control it all.

I gathered the members of the pack that weren't on the patrols—Claudio, Ethan, Tanner, and Rick—in the largest cabin, where we normally had our meetings. The air was tense when they arrived, and I watched them file into the room without a word. I leaned against the wall beside the door, letting them take their seats around the large, round table in the middle of the room.

When everyone was seated, I let out a slow breath. “As you all know, things are changing,” I said, looking around at them. “My mating with a Silverfang has changed everything for us. Before I tell you how it's going to go, I want to hear your concerns.”

I braced myself for the questions and anger that was sure to follow, but I was surprised when everyone looked around at each other and then looked down at the table.

I frowned, crossing my arms over my chest. “Well? Come on. No one has anything to say?”

“No, Alpha,” Ethan spoke up. “We just want to know what this means for the pack.”

“Nothing has changed, as far as I’m concerned.”

“Except your mate is from a rival pack,” Tanner pointed out, leaning forward so his eyes were oddly in shadow. “And this is looking a hell of a lot like what happened with the Canines. A Silverfang mate making the Alpha go soft. Not that you’ve gone soft yet, Alpha, but—”

“I am not soft, and I never will be.” I clenched my jaw. “I know how to run a pack. Whitney is going to be a positive thing for us, not a negative.”

“I hear you,” Tanner continued, “But I just can’t believe that a Silverfang, especially one like Whitney, would be okay living in a place like this and taking part in all of our under-the-table dealings, if you catch my drift. They are all goody-two-shoes. Naomi fucked up Danny completely, and she was a lamb compared to Whitney.”

I bristled, my wolf growling within me. I’d been holding onto a tight leash since I came back to find my mate missing, and I was getting tired of playing nice. If these wolves didn’t fall into line soon, I was going to have to make some examples.

“Let me make myself clear,” I said, pushing off of the wall and stalking toward the table. “Whitney will become a member of this pack and live here because that’s what we do with our mates. We’ll figure out her position in the pack later, but it’s

important that she stays.”

“Why?” Ethan asked, frowning at me. “You could have any number of mates from any number of packs. What makes her so special? Why are you so insistent that it’s her? I get that there was the mate match ceremony, but we’ve all heard her say she wants to go back to her old pack.”

Even the idea of taking a different mate made me want to throw the table across the room. There was no one for me but Whitney. No one. But they’d never understand. “Because she’s strong, and respected, and her reputation will make us more powerful,” I said, looking around at them. “That’s what this pack is about, right? Getting respect and power? I don’t want us to be this small, scraggly pack forever. Other packs will take us more seriously if I have Whitney at my side, and wolves that might have been interested in joining before will be more likely to, especially women.”

Tanner smirked. “Are you telling us that you’re trying to fuck your way to the top of the Alpha wolf hierarchy?”

I snarled, leaning forward and gripping the edge of the table. “Careful. I’m your fucking Alpha, Tanner, don’t make me remind you of it.”

“I’m just saying...” he trailed off, shrugging.

“And I’m just saying that we need to start thinking about how we’re going to change this pack into something bigger and better.” I straightened up, crossing my arms over my chest again. “Nothing is going to change immediately, but gun and drug running can only get us so far. We have to scrape out a place among the East Coast packs. Whitney is the first step in that direction.”

Claudio, who had been quiet thus far, finally spoke up. “You’re sounding more and

more like Danny, Man. I know you don't want to hear that but I wouldn't be doing my job if I didn't speak up."

I growled, gritting my teeth together. "I am nothing like Danny. Don't you dare say that again."

"All I'm saying is his mate came along and everything changed." Claudio shrugged, leaning back in his chair. "I get where you're coming from, I really do. We need more wolves to make us stronger, and female wolves in particular. And there's no denying that a mate from a big-name pack is going to make us seem more powerful than we actually are, but you have to understand that they're going to have an expectation of what you're going to be like as an Alpha."

"I know, that's why I'm telling you all that things are going to change," I snapped, irritated with the entire situation. Fed up, I stood quickly, my chair flying backward. "Look, if any of you have an issue with this, challenge me. Right now. Show that you've got what it takes to lead."

None of them moved, and I laughed harshly. "That's what I thought." I shook my head, staring down at them. "We're not the Red Canines, we're the Reckless Stalkers, and I am not Danny. We are going to become something better than the Canines ever were."

"What's your plan for that then?" Tanner asked. "You can't just tell us that and then not give us any details."

I looked around at them, letting out a slow breath. "I'm going to convince Whitney to stay here with us permanently, and then I'm going to force the other packs to acknowledge our legitimacy—through violence, if I have to. Once they know not to mess with us, we can expand and build a better pack than we have now."



Ethan looked thoughtful. “Good. That sounds good to me.”

“It’s a good plan,” Claudio agreed. “Whitney is a good person to start with, given her reputation. But what if she says no? What if you can’t convince her to stay?”

I’d been trying not to think about that since we had the mating ritual. “Then I’ll make sure she doesn’t have a choice. She belongs here, and she needs to understand that. Now...get the hell out of here. I need some time to think.”

I watched the wolves all stand and file out of the room, and then let out a slow breath, running my fingers through my hair. Things were going to work out. They had to. If Whitney wasn’t going to be with me, I wouldn’t know what to do with myself.

She was the first person that made me feel...complete. And our mating...it was something I’d never experienced before.

I closed my eyes, recalling the feeling of her soft, plump lips against mine. She’d tasted like sunshine and honey, and I wanted nothing more than to spend all night exploring every inch of her body. But I’d barely gotten the chance to touch her before it was over, and she’d made it clear that she didn’t want me touching her once the ritual was done. It was killing me to see my bite on her neck and know that I couldn’t touch her without it being a fight.

I shook my head. I had to get control of myself. I couldn’t let her see how much she was affecting me. The last thing I needed was for her to think that I was weak. Weak wolves were the reason why packs fell apart, and I wasn’t going to let that happen to mine.

I left the cabin, heading down the porch steps. I didn’t mention it to the pack, because I didn’t want to give them another reason to doubt my decisions, but there was still the underlying worry that Whitney would try to leave when the demon threat was

taken care of. I could force her to stay, but it would bring the wrath of her old pack down on us. And just letting her leave would make me look so weak that there would be no recovering from it.

Fuck. I wish I could call...anyone, really. Peter. Danny. Even fucking Hector. Just another Alpha that could tell me what to do. But I'd burnt all of my bridges and I was well and truly on my own.

But it was worth it to stay true to myself and my roots. It had to be.

I paced the length of the cabins, hands shoved in my pockets, thinking. Why did Naomi stay with Danny even though he kidnapped her? At first, it was because of the demons, but she fell for him pretty quickly after that. She stayed because she loved him.

Whitney kept saying she'd never love me, but during the mating ritual, when I was moving inside of her, she'd wanted me. It wasn't love, but she'd felt something besides hate. She'd wanted me to touch her, to kiss her, to make her come, and she'd softened toward me at least a little since then. I needed to get her back to that place.

That's when an idea came to me. I stopped, rubbing absentmindedly at my neck as I mulled it over. It might not help my reputation with my own wolves, but if I could get Whitney to return the mating bite, binding us together even more, she'd be well on her way to falling in love with me. It would give me time to figure out the rest.

A small voice in the back of my mind said that I didn't want to bind her to me that way unless she actually loved me, but I pushed it away. It didn't matter. This was just about power, about strength, and about keeping my mate.

I'd never been in love before, and I didn't think I was capable of it, but I still wanted Whitney in my life. That was enough, wasn't it?

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:40 am*

The days passed more normally than I would have expected. Julian and I were coldly distant with each other, although I caught him watching me more than I'd like to admit. He tried to get closer to me, but with each rejection, he got more frustrated and more short-tempered.

I could feel faint echoes of his emotions through our bond, but when the softer ones came through, I had to force myself to believe I was imagining it.

But I wasn't. Julian was softening toward me, and I knew that eventually, I'd have to confront that, but I kept putting it off. If I acknowledged it, then I'd have to confront my own feelings, and I wasn't ready to do that.

Instead, I focused on the demons. Every day we went out, and every night we found nothing. There were no more attacks and no trace of where the demons were hiding or what their plans might be. Julian showed us the places they'd seen the demons before, and the areas where he thought they were hiding out and watching his pack before he discovered them. One site was a cave that had a disturbing amount of bones in it and reeked of rotting flesh, but that was the closest we came.

It was frustrating. Infuriating, even. And my hormones weren't helping.

The clinic doctor had given me some medication to stop my nausea, and I wasn't far enough along yet to be experiencing any other effects, but I could tell a difference in my emotions. I found myself yearning to be held by none other than Julian Payne, the asshole who had gotten me in this state, to begin with, and the yearning for him became so intense some nights that I had to shift to wolf form and run through the woods until I was exhausted.

Sometimes Julian, also wearing his wolf skin, joined me, though we never acknowledged it during the daylight. It was our little secret, those runs through the moonlight. The first time I tried to lose him, but he kept up with me easily, his coppery coat blending in with the night a lot better than my stark white fur. I was made to run through the snowy expanses of Scandinavia, and it made me stand out like a sore thumb sometimes.

But oh well. He would have found me anyway.

The third night he ran with me it seemed he couldn't help himself but to touch me. I would have never pegged Julian Payne as anything close to playful, but his wolf told a different story. He was happy when he was running with me, even happier when he could sneak up on me and nudge me with his nose, or nip at my tail. I tried to pretend like it annoyed me, but in reality, it warmed my heart in a way I never could have imagined.

It made me wish that he wasn't such an asshole when he was in human form. Maybe then I wouldn't hate him so much.

This morning, we were packing my Subaru to drive back to the demon cave to see if any of them had returned to the freshest site and hopefully get some more clues, when my phone rang.

It was Faye, and I picked up reluctantly. I hadn't spoken to anyone from the Silverfangs since I had taken the bite, and I was nervous. Not about what they'd say, but what my reaction would be. I'd been keeping my feelings and emotions under control, and I didn't want anything to upset the delicate balance.

"Hey," I said, tucking the phone between my cheek and shoulder as I leaned into the car. "I was just about to call you."

“I’m surprised you’re not busy running around with your mate,” Faye’s voice was teasing, but it was more than I could handle right now.

“Can we please not talk about him?” I snapped, slamming the back hatch shut. I winced, feeling bad for snapping at her, and leaned against the car, looking up at the sky. It was a beautiful day, not a cloud in sight, and it was hard to imagine that just a week ago I was being attacked, forcing me into the mating ritual.

I exhaled slowly and tried again. “Sorry. It’s just...things have changed.”

“We heard,” a second voice, Naomi, said, surprising me. “Sorry, we didn’t want this to feel like an ambush but figured you’d rather speak to both of us at the same time and have it done and over with.”

“No, no, I appreciate it,” I said quickly. “It’s just...”

“A lot,” Naomi said softly. “Yeah. I know.”

I bit my lip, wondering what I could say. Everything I’d heard others say about Naomi had painted her as this weak, meek little lamb who had gotten kidnapped by Danny and then immediately fell in love with him. But none of that was true.

She was kind, loving, and fierce when she needed to be. She was strong, and she helped me realize that power came in many different forms.

“We just want you to know we’re here for you,” Faye said, breaking the silence. “We heard through the Reckless Stalker patrol that you’d take Julian’s bite. I can’t lie, I was shocked, but...I guess that’s fate.”

“That’s not what happened,” I said quickly. “I got attacked by demons the first night here and they targeted me. It all went to shit from there. His wolves took Laura and

would only let her go when I agreed to the ritual. He's just as much of an asshole as he ever was, if not more."

I heard Naomi's voice, softer than Faye's, speak first after my explanation. "I understand. Danny kidnapped me, so I get it. If you need a shoulder to cry on, or just someone to talk to, we're here. No matter how angry you are at Julian, it doesn't mean you have to be alone."

"I know. And thank you." I hesitated. "I...can I still come home, Faye? When this is over? Even if I've mated with Julian?"

I could hear Faye's sigh through the phone. "Of course, Whitney. I told you that before, and I meant it. The Silverfangs are your home, no matter what."

Tears pricked at my eyes and I cleared my throat. "Thank you. I needed to hear that."

"No problem. We love you."

I smiled. "I love you guys too. I'll call you later, okay? I have to get going."

"Whitney," Faye said before I could hang up. "The Silverfangs are your home, but it also isn't wrong if you want to make a home with your mate. He might be our enemy now, but I know how conflicted you must be. We won't blame you for anything, okay? Just take your time."

I nodded, though they couldn't see it, and said goodbye before hanging up. The last thing I wanted to think about right now was my relationship with Julian, but my conversation with Faye and Naomi had brought the issue to the forefront of my mind. I was stuck here for now, but once we figured out what the demons were planning, I could go home.

I would have to leave my mate behind.

But what if I didn't want to?

That thought stopped me cold. I didn't want to think about it, but my heart was racing just the same. What if Julian wasn't the horrible, terrible man I'd always assumed he was? What if he was actually worth my time?

What if we could make a life together?

I shook my head hard to dispel the thought. So what if he'd been providing for me ever since we arrived, making sure Laura and I were well-fed and had our own space even when I was sure he wanted to be near me? So what if the sex was amazing, and he was hot as hell? I wasn't going to fold just because of a six-pack and an orgasm.

And the playful stuff when we ran as wolves at night...the way he'd made an effort to apologize and speak to me calmly after the mating...it didn't matter. It couldn't matter.

We were nothing more than forced mates, and I was still planning to leave him behind the minute the demon threat was neutralized.

With a sigh, I went to find Julian and Laura. Maybe work would take my mind off of all of this.

\*\*\*

The drive to the demon cave took some time, and I made sure to pop a nausea pill before we took off. The place was foul and it would have made my stomach turn on a good day, but now that I was pregnant, it was a million times worse.

When I was sure Julian wasn't looking, I took a vial of peppermint oil out of my backpack and rubbed some below my nostrils.

He glanced at me when I came out of the car, and I could feel his eyes on me as I approached. "What?"

"You smell like Christmas," he said, raising an eyebrow. "I like it."

"Good thing I don't care if you like it or not," I replied coolly, stepping past him.

He sighed and fell in step beside me. "I was just trying to be nice."

"You know what would be even nicer? If you'd keep your comments to yourself."

Laura laughed softly, coming up to walk on my other side. "Wow. You guys are hilarious. I can't wait for the honeymoon period to be over so you can stop flirting."

I shot her a dark look, but it only made her laugh harder.

We stepped into the demon cave and I immediately wanted to turn around and leave. The stench of death, rot, and sulfur was so strong it almost knocked me over, and I had to stop for a moment to let my stomach settle. I took out my peppermint oil and rubbed some below my nostrils again, trying to ignore Laura and Julian's confused expressions.

"What?" I snapped, putting the vial away. "If we're going to do this, we might as well try to make it bearable."

"I'm just saying..." Laura held up her hands. "It's not like I don't have a nose either, but if it helps, I'm not complaining."



“Me neither,” Julian said quickly, stepping forward. “But...peppermint?”

“It’s an old human trick I learned from our pack medic. He’d done some time working in an ER and said the smells were unbelievable at times.”

“Okay, yeah. That makes sense.” Julian looked at the cave, then back to me, and sighed before holding out his hand. “Give it here, then. I’ll try anything once.”

I tried not to smile at his double meaning as I pulled the vial out of my pocket and handed it to him. “Just rub a little below your nose and you should be good.”

We entered the cave to begin our investigation, and everything looked frustratingly the same as it had the previous day. We’d all hoped that the freshness of the site meant that they were still using it, but it looked like we were just a few days too late to catch them. Damn.

Laura guarded the cave entrance while Julian and I donned gloves and started to pick through the detritus left behind, hoping to find any clue as to what their intentions or next move might be.

It was a frustrating exercise, and it wasn’t long before I felt like I was about to lose my mind. “Let’s just burn it all and be done with it.”

“I understand the urge,” Julian said from deeper in the cave, but there was an edge of uneasiness to his voice that had me snapping to attention. “But I think we should be a little more thorough. Look at this.”

I came a few steps closer and gasped, almost dropping my flashlight when I saw what he was holding—a human skull with some flesh still clinging to it. My stomach turned, but I held myself together. This was just a part of the job.

“There’s more of them,” Laura said quietly, coming to stand next to me. “It looks like a whole pile.”

“We need to move them out,” I said, forcing myself to look at the skull in Julian’s hands. “They deserve better than to rot here in a cave with these monsters.”

Julian nodded grimly. “Laura, you run back to the cars and see if you can find a couple of tarps or something that we can use to carry them.”

“Got it,” she said quickly, already sprinting for the exit.

Julian and I both stared at the skull in his hands for a long moment and then he cleared his throat and set it on the ground. “I could be wrong, but they’re expending a ton of energy if they’re going through human vessels this quickly. They could always be eating them, but it seems like a lot of work to hunt people when they can subsist off of normal food when they’re wearing a human vessel.”

“Do you think it could be something else? Like...I don’t know...a ritual of some kind?”

“Maybe. I’ve heard of demons needing to eat humans to keep their power up, but if that was the case, it would have to be a big ritual with a ton of power.”

I grimaced, thinking of all of the possibilities. “Let’s just hope that whatever it is, we can stop it before it’s too late.”

We spent another hour searching through the cave for any clues but came up empty-handed. We’d managed to move the bodies outside when I heard Julian’s phone ring. Usually, I would have ignored it, but I felt a shiver run down his back when he looked at the screen and saw the name there. Shock, anger, and concern. Who the hell could it be?

I didn't have to wait long for an answer. Julian took his filthy gloves off and put the phone to his ear, biting out the name, "Danny."

I couldn't hear the conversation, but Julian's stony expression broke after about thirty seconds, real worry flashing over his handsome features before he forced the neutral expression back on once more. He didn't speak, but just listened for two or so minutes, before saying, "For him. Not you. Send me the location." Then he paused, adding, "She's with me. Fine. We're on our way."

My heartbeat was fast and fluttery, like a hummingbird, when he hung up and stalked toward me. I was frozen, waiting for his explanation, because the energy I could feel through our bond had me nearly panicked. Something was really, really wrong.

But Julian didn't explain right away. His first words burst out like he couldn't hold them back, and just had to tell someone. "That's the first time we've spoken since the Naomi thing."

"What did he want?" I prodded, impatient.

Julian swallowed hard, rolling his neck to ease some of the tension there. "Peter was on his way to Silverfang Creek territory to deliver a load of weapons that Saul had spelled when he was run off the road. He was on a back road nearly halfway between the territories, and while Danny can track his phone, it hasn't moved and Peter hasn't answered. He's positive he's been taken by demons and Danny is hours away."

I put the pieces together in my head instantly as Laura came up beside us, already taking her own gloves off. "Halfway between the territories means he's close to us."

Julian nodded grimly. "We have to go. There's no one else."

"Let's go."

It didn't take long for us to get back to the cars, and Julian called out orders as we drove. "I've got the location that Danny sent me. Do we need to go back to the cabins to get your weapons?"

Laura and I both laughed out loud. "Oh, no. Not at all. I'll show you our car stash when we get there."

His eyebrows raised as he glanced at me, then looked back at the road. "You have weapons stashed in your car?"

"We have a weapons stash everywhere," Laura explained, looking excited to show him. She loved showing off our gear almost as much as I did.

Julian chuckled softly. "Damn, I should have had you guys on my side from the jump."

"Bold of you to assume we're on your side." I huffed. "This is just a temporary alliance."

"Whatever you have to tell yourself," Julian replied, steering us out onto the main road, his expression going grim. "I'm glad to have the help for this, either way."

I didn't say anything but took a second to examine his face. Peter had raised Julian, and he must be sick with worry deep down. No amount of pack violence or animosity could break a bond like that. Peter might be disgusted over what Julian did to Naomi, but he'd probably walk through fire to save him.

It took forty minutes to reach the area that Danny had marked on Julian's phone. The closer we got, the more I could feel the dread building in my stomach. This wasn't going to be good.

We parked off the side of the road, and I jumped out to open the floor hatch in the back of the vehicle, revealing our weapons stash. Julian and Laura joined me, Julian letting out a low whistle.

“Damn. I was expecting some knives, maybe a crossbow.”

“Well, you know what they say. Expect the unexpected,” I said, pulling out two blades for me and one for Laura, before grabbing my belt with my knives. I took one of the guns, too. Laura and Julian each took one as well, along with a knife.

Julian strapped a sword to his back, and it was almost comical watching him try to adjust the strap that had been sized for someone much smaller. “His truck should be just beyond the tree line if Danny’s location is accurate, and we’ll have to track them from there. Peter is...ah. Fuck. He’s a strong old bastard, but he’s not as much of a fighter as he was in his prime. We have to hurry.”

I nodded, strapping the belt on. “Let’s get going. Lead the way.”

The three of us fell into a steady pace as we jogged through the trees, moving as silently as possible. The forest was quiet, too quiet for my tastes, and I knew it wouldn’t take long for the demons to figure out we were here.

We found the truck within ten minutes, but it didn’t look like anything had been touched. “I’m surprised they bothered taking him alive.”

“They would have taken him out immediately if they wanted him dead. They want him for something else.” Julian growled, emotions running high. “Another bargaining chip, I’m sure.

“Bargaining chip? For who?” Laura asked, but the answer hit me instantly.

“Peter’s connection to Danny and Julian makes him valuable,” I said softly. “If they took Peter, then they want to negotiate. For a witch, no doubt. Faye, Sienna...or me, I guess.”

“Fuck.” Julian rubbed a hand over his face. “Well, if they want a negotiation, they’ve got one. And it’ll be the last one they ever make.”

We ran faster, following the trail of the demons, and it only took a few minutes for us to reach the edge of a clearing. There was a small, dilapidated cabin in the center, with an SUV parked outside of it, and even from here I could feel the dark energy radiating out of it.

We ducked behind some bushes just inside the tree line, but Julian was already moving toward the cabin. I reached out and grabbed his wrist, my fingers barely wrapping all the way around it.

He looked down at me, his eyes flashing with anger and frustration. “What?”

“You can’t just go running in there without a plan,” I hissed. “They could kill you and then we’ll have no chance of finding Peter.”

“I’m not letting him die,” Julian growled low, his teeth clenched so tight I could hear them grind together.

I shook my head. “Of course not. But we need to know what we’re up against first. That SUV seats five, so there are four at most. We can handle that, but we need to secure Peter first.”

Julian nodded, taking a deep breath and forcing himself to relax. “Alright. Three of us, four of them. If we go in fast and hard, we can get Peter and get out before they have time to react.

“Good,” I said, scanning the area and thinking. “Laura, you circle around back. Stay in wolf form, but don’t be seen. We don’t want them to know we’re coming. Cause a distraction if you need to. I’ll wait for your signal.”

“Got it,” she said quickly, stripping and shifting into her dark gray wolf form. She ran silently through the trees, heading for the back of the cabin.

I looked up at Julian, and he was staring at me, his eyes wide and a little shocked. “What?”

“That was...that was good. Smart. Laura is good in a fight, but you’ve got a better eye for strategy than I do.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “I’m more of a hit first, ask questions later kinda guy.”

I tried not to smile at the compliment. “Yeah, I got that impression. So how about you stay here and wait until Laura gives us the signal.”

“Or...” Julian said, cocking his head to the side. “You stay here and wait for Laura to give us the signal, and I’ll go in.”

I scoffed. You wish—

I didn’t have time to finish my thought before Laura gave three muted yips from behind the cabin. We’d practiced over and over again to mimic a coyote as closely as possible so we didn’t tip off our enemies, but three yips were a bad sign. It meant ‘emergency’.

I told Julian as much, and he was sprinting toward the cabin before I could stop him, keeping low to the ground with his borrowed sword unsheathed. Fuck , I thought. So much for being sneaky.

I followed him, pulling my blades out and running silently behind him, scanning for any movement from the demons. We reached the door in less than thirty seconds, but when Julian tried to turn the doorknob it wouldn't budge.

"Damn," he said, rattling it harder. "It's locked."

My eyes widened when I heard a thump from inside the house, like someone falling to the floor, and then a man's huff of pain. Without thinking, Julian slammed his shoulder against the door, putting all of his strength into it.

There was a loud cracking sound as the wood around the lock splintered and the door swung open. I didn't have time to revel in the victory, because Julian was already running into the room, his sword at the ready.

I followed him inside, my heart dropping as I saw the scene before us. Peter was on the ground, his hands bound, bleeding from his temple but thankfully still conscious. Two demons were standing in the far corner of the room, while one was standing over Peter, his foot pulled back as if to kick the older man a second time.

If there was a fourth demon it wasn't in the structure. As soon as I had the thought, I heard Laura's snarl and the shriek of a demon in pain out back and grinned. My partner could handle herself.

The two demons that had been in the corner took off for the back of the house, trying to get out before we could catch them while the third went for the front. I tackled that one to the ground, slicing across his hamstrings with my knife before rolling out of the way to let Julian finish him. The demon was still screaming and thrashing when Julian sliced his head clean off.

I jumped up and sprinted for the back door, but two of the demons were sprinting for the cover of the trees while Laura finished off her adversary. I couldn't help but smile



when I saw the nasty gash across his neck where Laura had ripped his throat out. It was an instant kill wound, but the demon was stubbornly hanging onto his life.

“Stupid mutt,” he hissed at me. “You’re all going to die today.”

I kicked him hard in the ribs, and the sickening crack was music to my ears. “You’re the only one who’s going to be dying here, Buddy.”

He opened his mouth to reply, but before he could speak, I slammed my knife through his eye socket, straight into his brain. It was a messy kill, but I didn’t have time to be neat right now. We backed off as it popped out of existence in a shower of sparks, Laura shaking her head hard to get rid of the taste of demon blood.

We’d only killed two of four, but there was something more important: Peter. Julian had stayed inside with his old mentor, who was on his back, trying to push himself into a sitting position, but he looked hurt and disoriented. Julian moved to his side and knelt, helping him up.

“What happened?” Julian growled,

Peter winced, touching his head gingerly and coming away with a bloody hand. “I was run off the road, and two of them pulled me out of the car.” His voice was steady, despite the situation. “They knocked me out, then took me here. I don’t know what they wanted, but every time I tried to shift they beat the shit out of me to keep me in human form. Bastards.”

I could guess what they wanted, and Julian probably could too, but that was something that could wait until we were back at the cabin and could figure out our next move. Instead, I focused on the here and now. “We killed two of them.”

“The two that got away were the ringleaders.” Peter coughed, struggling to stand on

his own, but unable to keep his balance. I grabbed him by the arm, putting my shoulder under his to hold him upright. “Shame we couldn’t grab them.”

“Don’t worry about that right now,” Julian said gruffly. “The girls will take you home. I’ll catch those fuckers, and then we can talk.”

“What do you mean—?” I couldn’t even finish the question before Julian was shifting, loping out of the cabin and following the trail of the escaped demons. “Julian!” I screamed after him, shocked, but he didn’t stop.

“Let him go, Kid,” Peter huffed. “There’s no stopping that one when he sets his mind to something.”

I would kill him , I thought. How dare he go after them alone, two against one? How dare he put himself in stupid danger like that?

We walked as fast as we could back through the woods, but Peter was unsteady and weak from his wounds. Laura had shifted back and dressed, and the three of us were quiet for the entire walk back to the cars, which thankfully were still in one piece.

Peter’s tires were flat, and unsurprisingly, the demons had emptied all the spelled weapons out of it. But that was a problem for another time. Laura and I loaded him into the Outback. He looked tired and in pain, but I’d seen worse wounds on our kind. “We need to get you back to Canines territory so Saul can check you over.”

“You’ve already done more than enough,” Peter replied, his eyes falling shut. “You should go help Julian before he gets himself killed.”

“Oh, don’t worry. We’ll help him alright. He’s going to regret giving me this damn bite when I get my hands on him.” I growled, looking back to make sure Laura was still with me.

She didn't look happy about it. Her dark hair was tangled and snarled with twigs, and she looked as exhausted as I felt. But we weren't going to be able to stop anytime soon. I could feel Julian down our bond, and the thought of leaving him out in the middle of nowhere to fight on his own made me feel sick. Well, sicker than usual.

"You're going to go after that prick, aren't you?" Laura sighed, climbing into the back seat.

"Of course I am," I huffed. "Those demons he's after might have critical information."

Laura barked out a laugh. "Sure, Whitney. I'm sure that's why."

I ignored her, starting the car and heading for where I knew Julian would be, following our bond like a built-in GPS. We drove in silence, but the energy in the car was tense. We were both tired, hurt, and pissed off at Julian for running off like he had. Peter was dozing in the passenger seat, but I didn't want to leave him without medical care for much longer. Julian better not be far.

But he was, and it took me almost an hour to get as close to where I sensed him. I parked the car and got out, opening the hatch in the back. "He's not far."

"Then what are we waiting for?" Laura growled, stripping and shifting, shaking her head when she was done. I pulled my knives out and put them in my belt, strapping the gun on too, before closing the back up.

She followed me as I followed the bond, and we moved quickly through the trees until we reached another clearing. Julian was there, panting hard, his shirt hanging off of his body in tatters and his skin covered in sweat. At his feet were the two escaped demons, or at least what was left of them. The first had already exploded and nothing but a dark, greasy spot on the ground was left. The second was drawing its last

breath, and from what I could see, Julian had made sure it was a slow, miserable death at that.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” I demanded, walking toward him and resisting the urge to punch him in the face.

Julian glared at me, his chest still heaving from exertion. He was so fucking gorgeous that it hurt. “I got some good information.”

“So what? You know they’d be thrilled to kill you,” I shouted, getting right in his face. “You’re so fucking stubborn and selfish, you have no regard for anyone else around you!”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” he yelled back, his hands curling into fists. “I didn’t ask you to come help me, I didn’t ask you to follow me! I can handle my own damn fights.”

“You idiot!” I shoved him back a step. “You’re outnumbered two to one. Do you think those demons would have spared you, even if you did manage to kill both of them?”

Julian glared at me, breathing hard, and I knew he was struggling to hold onto his human form. If he shifted, I wouldn’t be able to make him hear reason. “I’m not your responsibility—”

I don’t know what came over me, whether it was the exhaustion, the adrenaline from the fight, the worry I’d felt searching for him, or the blinding relief that had swept over me when I saw him alive, but something drove me to throw myself at him. I grabbed the shreds of his shirt and pulled him to me, crushing my lips to his, a small sob escaping me as I finally got real confirmation he was alive—his breath mingling with mine, his heartbeat under my hands.

He made a surprised noise, but his arms were instantly around me, one hand sliding into my hair to angle my head so he could deepen the kiss. He kissed me hard, biting my lower lip before pulling away just enough to rest our foreheads together. “Fuck, Whitney.”

Before I could be even more ridiculous and kiss him again, someone yipped from behind us.

Oh, shit. I’d totally forgotten that Laura was with us.

I jumped away from Julian, who was reluctant to let me go. Laura, still in wolf form, barked at us both, amused and annoyed. She wanted to get going.

“You’re right,” Julian sighed, running a hand through his hair. “We need to get Peter to Saul, and we need to talk.”

I nodded. I didn’t have the energy to argue with him, and I definitely needed to sleep before we had the inevitable argument about what happened next. I turned and headed back toward the car, but Julian caught my hand. I looked back at him, my cheeks still flushed and my lips tingling from our kiss.

“I’m glad you came after me,” he said, squeezing my fingers.

I didn’t pull away immediately. “It wasn’t easy. Following the bond was like tracing a single strand of spider silk in the bright sun. It was there and then it wasn’t, over and over again.”

Julian paused, looking to make sure Laura was out of earshot before murmuring, “There’s a way to cement the bond and it makes it a lot more concrete. If you returned my mate bite, we’d be able to sense each other to the ends of the earth. But you won’t do it, so I won’t ask.

I knew what he was talking about, but hearing it put so bluntly made me annoyed. "I've told you a million times—"

"That you're going back to the Silverfangs when this is over. Trust me, I know. Just...think about it. I won't mention it again, but think about it." He leaned in and pressed a kiss to my cheek, then turned to follow Laura to the car.

I stood there for a minute, my skin tingling where his lips had brushed over it, and my thoughts spinning. The more time I spent with him, the more I wanted to stay. But I couldn't. If the demons disappeared off the face of the earth tomorrow, Julian would go back to being my enemy in a flash...wouldn't he? And what he was asking for, giving him my mate bite, that was serious. It was a lifelong commitment. I'd be tied to him forever.

It was too much to think about right now' so I shook my head and followed them. We had to get Peter home, and it was a long drive to the Red Canines.

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:40 am*

It was nearly 11 pm when we made it to the border of Danny's territory. Naomi had called Whitney earlier and told her that Saul would meet us on the edge of town to get Peter, but Danny's mate must have heard how bone-tired Whitney was because she called back not long after and asked to be put on speakerphone.

"I'm speaking for Danny—Julian's old apartment is just as he left it, and you and Julian are being given a one-time allowance to sleep there for the night before leaving in the morning. Consider it repayment for saving Peter, he says. But if you aren't gone by morning, the Red Canines will force you out as violently as necessary." I could hear the disdain in Naomi's voice when she spoke the last sentence, but she didn't hesitate to relay her mate's words.

"We've got Laura—"

"If Laura doesn't want to share the apartment with you two, we have a card on file at the Holiday Inn a mile down the road."

Whitney bit her lower lip, glancing at me, "Julian?"

Naomi's words had started a storm inside of me. My old apartment. Longing hit me like a truck. The place where I'd first lived independently, the symbol of my place as a valued member of the pack. I hadn't been back since I'd left to form the Reckless Stalkers.

It was stupid to let myself get hung up on it, but the fact that I'd been given permission to come back, even just for tonight, made me feel like a huge weight had been lifted off of my shoulders. "Yeah," I managed, my voice sounding weird to my

own ears. “We’ll take it. Thanks, Naomi.”

There was a long pause on the other end of the line. I could almost hear the wheels turning in Naomi’s head, but she didn’t ask any questions, thankfully. “No problem. There’s a spare key under the flower pot at the back of the building. Let yourselves in and be gone by 7 am tomorrow.” She paused, then added, “Danny told me to tell you to stay away from our house, or he’ll tear your head off.”

I laughed. “Tell Danny he’s welcome to try.” I heard a growl on the other end of the line, and it was a fight to keep the smirk off my face. “I know he means well, though, and we won’t go near the house. Promise.”

Naomi sighed, sounding exasperated. “You two are ridiculous,” she huffed, then hung up the phone.

Whitney looked at me, raising an eyebrow. “What was all that about?”

“Nothing. Let’s just go.”

We pulled into the gas station where Saul was already waiting, his arms crossed as he leaned against his old truck. His face was full of animosity for me, and I took a step back when I felt the magic pouring off of him. The human Red Canine witch was a different breed than Faye or even Whitney. No one could touch Faye in terms of raw power, but Saul wasn’t afraid to dip his toes into dark magic when it suited him, and that made him unpredictable.

We’d gotten along fine when I was a member of the pack, but things were much, much different now, and Saul’s loyalty to Danny ran deep.

“Traitor,” he said to me in greeting, pale eyes narrowed before he turned to the girls who were helping Peter out of the SUV. “Whitney, Laura. Thank you for bringing



Peter home to us.”

“Of course,” Laura said, brushing a strand of hair out of her face. “No one else would have been able to get to him so fast.”

Saul nodded, his jaw tight. “I’m told I need to drop you off at the hotel, too, Laura, so let’s get a move on. Peter needs to be in bed and I need to examine him for any lingering demonic effects. Let me help you get him into the truck.”

I opened my mouth to say something, but Whitney stepped aside and let Saul take her place before she grabbed my hand and squeezed hard. I shut up.

Saul didn’t acknowledge me again as he and Laura got Peter into the front seat of his truck. Laura slid into the back and Saul closed the door before turning to me. “Danny doesn’t want you in the territory, but you have a place to sleep tonight because you brought Peter home. That’s the only reason.”

I nodded. “I’ll be gone by morning.”

“Good.” He didn’t say anything else, but instead got into the truck and drove off.

I sighed, leaning against the SUV. “Well, that was fun.”

Whitney crossed her arms, leaning against the car next to me. She looked as tired as I felt, and I knew the events of the day had worn her down. It made me want to protect her, even though I knew she didn’t need it.

“Let’s just go to the apartment and get some sleep,” I said, pushing away from the car. “We have to be gone by seven in the morning.”

She sighed, rubbing her eyes with her hands. “Yeah, okay.”

I reached out to touch her arm, but she pulled away from me, climbing into the driver's side without looking at me. I sighed, then opened the passenger door and got in.

Whitney didn't say anything the rest of the ride, and we pulled up to the apartment complex ten minutes later. She stopped the car in front of the building and parked it. I wanted to reach out to her, to reassure her, but she was still distant. The kiss earlier had obviously made her uncomfortable.

The building was one of those 1970s ones, a boxy concrete structure with long hallways and narrow doors, but it had been redone shortly before I moved in. My stomach did flip flops at the thought of returning to it, and how much I had missed my space. It made me feel weak, but I couldn't shake it. Dammit. It just still felt so much like home.

I knew exactly which pot the key would be under. It was just a regular house key, but it was attached to a keychain with a tiny stuffed wolf on it. A joke gift from Danny all those years ago when I'd first moved in. I hadn't thought of this stupid keychain in months, but now that I was holding it, I couldn't believe I'd forgotten it.

I really was going to be sick.

"Hey," Whitney's voice called out from behind me. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," I said, standing up and turning to her, forcing a smile. "You're the one who looks like she's about to pass out."

Whitney frowned. "I'm not feeling great, but I'm fine." She looked up at me, her expression curious. "What's that?"

I shrugged, trying to pretend it didn't mean anything. "It's the spare key for the

apartment.”

She smiled a little. “Is that why you looked like you were about to cry? Because you got excited about getting a key to your old apartment?”

“Fuck off,” I mumbled, turning away from her. I wanted to be alone and to stop feeling like this. The sooner we got inside and went to sleep, the sooner I would feel better.

Whitney followed me up the stairs to the third floor, where my apartment was. I hadn’t been in months, but I still knew exactly which one it was without hesitation. The numbers had been changed to silver, and the welcome mat was gone, but it was still home. I unlocked the door and let myself inside.

The place was almost exactly as I remembered it. The walls were painted a warm cream color, the furniture was old and battered but clean, and the kitchen was open to the living room. There was a narrow hallway on the far side of the living room that led to the only bedroom and bathroom.

The walls were lined with vintage framed records and concert posters, carefully framed so I didn’t look like a dumbass teenager decorating their bedroom. There was a seldom-used acoustic guitar in the corner, collecting dust like everything else.

I dropped the key onto the counter that separated the kitchen from the living room, then walked over to the window and pulled back the curtain.

There wasn’t much to the balcony, just a couple of pots with long-dead plants and a plastic chair. It had been a selling point for me when I first rented the apartment, but now the dead plants were making me feel like shit.

Whitney followed me out, looking around in shock. “Holy shit.”

“What?” I asked, frowning as I turned away from the window to face her.

She shook her head in disbelief, gesturing at the apartment. “It’s so...normal. Clean. Organized. I expected more chaos.”

“Just because I’m an asshole doesn’t mean I live in a pigsty.”

“No,” Whitney said. “That’s not what I meant. It just looks like you were...happy here, I guess. You always talk like you despise this pack.”

“I do.” I turned back to the window, trying to avoid looking at my former home. “But I was happy here. And that’s why I hate it so much now.”

“Why?”

“Because Danny took all of that from me. He left it all for Naomi, he turned our pack from what we were meant to be into some...pampered family vacation pack.”

“I think he was just being a good Alpha,” Whitney said, leaning against the counter. “The old Red Canines weren’t good for anything but drugs and guns. Now they’re happy, they’ve got mates and families. Isn’t that better?”

“No!” I slammed my hand down on the windowsill, making her jump. I immediately regretted it and shoved both my hands in my pockets. “Sorry. Fuck. Please can we drop it? It’s been a long damn day.”

I heard Whitney sigh behind me. “Fine.” She pushed off of the counter, crossing the room to me. I tried to keep my breathing calm as she came closer, but it was hard to remember why I was so mad at Danny when she was touching me. She put one hand on my chest, her fingers gently curling into the fabric of my shirt, and rested her other hand on my neck. Her palm was warm against my skin.

“I’m sorry you lost your family, Julian,” she said softly. “But we both know that this isn’t what Danny intended. He never wanted to hurt you, and I know you didn’t want to hurt him either.”

She leaned in and pressed her lips to mine before I could say anything else. I groaned, letting my hands rest on her hips as she pushed me up against the windowsill. She pressed her body against mine, kissing me slowly as I wrapped my arms around her. She had to be exhausted from the day, but she kissed me like she couldn’t get enough.

Her scent enveloped me, making me feel dizzy. The scent of her lust made me growl deep in my throat. “Why?” I managed to ask between deep, wet kisses, “You don’t want me.”

Whitney stepped back, albeit reluctantly, and looked around us. “Seeing you react to all of this...it might make me an idiot, but it’s like seeing the real you for the first time. I don’t mind Julian with emotions. I want more.”

“Fuck,” I swore, grabbing her hips and pulling her against me. I was already hard and aching for her, and I knew she could feel it. “I don’t deserve you,” I whispered in her ear before kissing down her neck.

“We’re not talking about that right now,” Whitney replied, grabbing my hands and moving them from her hips to her breasts. “Right now I just need you to fuck me, Julian. Preferably in the shower, after we’ve washed all the blood off.”

I groaned, burying my face in her neck and inhaling deeply. She always smelled so good. I wanted to devour her whole. “Yeah,” I said. “Let’s do that.”

She pulled away from me and grabbed my hand, tugging me toward the bathroom. I followed her eagerly, feeling like I was on fire. I needed her naked right fucking now.

The bathroom was tiny but clean. It had a white tile floor and walls, with a white tiled walk-in shower in the corner. It was definitely not built for two people, but that wasn't going to stop us.

Whitney started taking off her clothes as soon as the door closed behind me. Her jacket fell to the floor with a wet thud, then she bent over to pull off her boots. She looked up at me, raising an eyebrow. "Are you just going to stand there?"

"Oh," I said, realizing what she meant. "Yeah." I hurriedly unbuttoned my shirt, letting it fall to the floor. My jeans followed, then my shoes and socks. When I was completely naked, I straightened and found Whitney staring at me.

She'd already stripped out of the rest of her clothes and was standing in front of me completely bare, her gaze hot as she looked me up and down. "You're beautiful," she breathed, reaching out to touch my chest.

I caught her hand, gently pulling her into the shower with me. She stepped over the edge and let me turn her, pinning her against the wall as I turned on the water. It came out cold at first but quickly warmed up until it was steaming hot.

It felt so damn good on my sore muscles, but I didn't have time to think about that, not when Whitney's scent was flooding the tiny shower space, making me dizzy.

She shivered beneath my hands, gasping as the water hit her, and I leaned down to kiss her again. The kiss was desperate and messy, all tongue and teeth, and I pressed my thigh between her legs. She moaned against my mouth, arching her hips against me as the water poured down over us.

Whitney broke our kiss, leaning her head back against the tile wall and closing her eyes. "Julian," she whispered, her voice raw.

I kissed down her neck, pausing to lick over her pulse before I kept going down to her chest. “What do you want, Baby?” I asked, my voice low.

“Make me come,” she begged, grinding against my thigh. “I need it.”

“Yeah,” I replied, sucking a nipple into my mouth and teasing it with my teeth. “Anything you want.”

She groaned, her hands going to my head, nails scratching against my scalp. I hummed against her, nipping at the sensitive skin until she was panting. Her hand slipped down my face, down my chest to where I was already hard and aching. I knew we should have gotten clean first, but the only thing I could think about was getting my dick inside of her.

I growled in frustration, pulling away from her. She whined, but I shook my head and knelt in front of her. I grabbed her hips and pulled her toward me, burying my face between her legs.

She gasped, her hands tangling in my hair. “Julian!” she exclaimed, but her voice was drowned out by the water still pouring down over us. I licked into her, swirling my tongue over her clit in fast circles until she was quivering.

The taste of her was intoxicating. I couldn’t get enough of it, couldn’t stop licking and sucking at her pussy until she was gasping for air above me.

She came hard with a sharp cry, her entire body shaking as I held onto her. When she finally stopped trembling, she slumped against the wall of the shower.

“Fuck,” she breathed. She pushed herself off of the wall and smiled at me. “I need you inside of me.”

I nodded, standing up and grabbing her hips again. “Hold on,” I warned, then lifted her easily. She wrapped her legs around me, her arms going around my neck. I pressed her against the wall, then guided myself into her slowly, inch by inch.

She exhaled, burying her face in my neck as I bottomed out, my cock buried deep inside her wet heat. “God,” she moaned, rolling her hips. “You feel so damn good.”

“So do you,” I said, my voice rough. I pulled out a little, then thrust back in, making her gasp. “Fuck, I love the way you feel around me.” I began to thrust into her harder and faster, and she made the most delicious sounds in response.

Her fingers dug into my shoulders, nails biting into the skin. Her breath was hot on my neck, and I could hear her heart pounding in her chest.

I kept my pace steady, not wanting to hurt her or make it end too soon, but when her moans became whimpers and her hips arched against mine, I knew she was close to unraveling.

Then, she changed everything.

“I want to bite you,” she gasped, her fingers finding the place where my neck met my shoulder. “I want it, Julian.”

I growled, thrusting into her harder. “You sure?” I asked, my voice rough. I wanted Whitney to mark me as hers, I wanted everyone to know she had claimed me.

“Yes, yes. Just promise you won’t make me change who I am or what I do, Julian. Please.”

I could have sworn my heart stopped at those words. “Never,” I promised. “Never.”



Whitney let out a shaking breath, pressing her face into the side of my neck. “Good.”

She kissed my shoulder, tasting my flesh, and then bit down hard.

I cursed as her teeth broke through my skin, her mouth hot on me. It hurt, but it also felt incredible. I swore I could feel the world shift around us as the bond locked into place, going from a thin wire to something strong and golden. Her pleasure rushed down the bond, meeting mine and making us both cry out.

Mate. Whitney was my mate.

When she pulled away from my neck, she licked her lips. Her blue eyes were dark with desire, her cheeks flushed, and she looked beautiful. I couldn’t take my eyes off of her. I held her tighter, thrusting up into her pussy in strong, steady strokes.

She kissed me like she was drowning and I was air. “I’m gonna come, Julian. Please don’t stop.”

I growled, thrusting harder into her. “Come for me, Baby,” I said, nipping at her earlobe.

She did, her whole body shuddering as her pussy clenched around my cock, my name falling from her lips. It was enough to throw me over the edge and I exploded inside of her, filling her with my seed in three hard thrusts, stars exploding behind my eyes. We stood like that for a minute, our chests heaving and hearts racing. I pressed my forehead against hers, breathing in deeply through my nose. I couldn’t get enough of her scent, the way it made me feel like I was home.

I pulled out of her slowly, making us both exhale at the loss as I put her back on her feet.

“I suppose we should actually shower now,” Whitney sighed, just before her stomach growled. She looked mortified, but I just laughed, kissing the top of her wet head under the falling water.

“Let’s make it quick, and I’ll feed you afterward.”

\*\*\*

My promise to feed my mate wasn’t as easy to complete as I first anticipated, but after scrounging through all the expired things in my old kitchen, I found a giant can of tomato sauce and some spaghetti. Deep in the back of the fridge was an unopened bottle of wine, and while we didn’t have any parmesan or garlic bread, it was better than nothing. I was actually excited about cooking for her, but I would never admit that to anyone else.

While I cooked the pasta, Whitney dressed in the borrowed clothes I pulled out of my dresser.

I had just plated our food when she came out dressed in a gray t-shirt of mine and oversized sweatpants. Her hair was damp and pulled back in a messy bun, and she looked so damn sexy that I could barely keep myself from going over to her and bending her over the counter.

I didn’t know what things would be like between us tomorrow, but for tonight, I was soaking in being able to touch her and care for her. If we went back to being enemies in the following days, I’d always have the memories of this and the mate bite on my neck.

Maybe I was going soft, but only for Whitney. And I’d never say it out loud.

“It smells amazing,” Whitney said, taking a seat at the counter. I slid the plate toward

her, then grabbed the wine and two glasses from the cabinet.

“Thanks,” I said, trying not to grin. “It’s not gourmet, but it does the job.”

Whitney twirled some pasta on her fork and took a bite, sighing happily. “It’s delicious,” she said, licking sauce off of her bottom lip.

“Glad you like it.”

We ate in silence for a few minutes, and I poured the cheap wine. It tasted...not great. Overly sweet. But it was better than nothing.

Whitney looked at her glass and frowned, a strange look coming over her face before she continued eating. She didn’t touch the wine, but I figured she was just skeptical.

It was all...nice. Romantic, even, besides the fact I barely knew what that meant. My plan was to make her fall for me, and that was going in the right direction, but whatever was happening inside of me wasn’t on the agenda.

When we finished eating, Whitney insisted on doing the dishes, and I let her. She’d made it through half the dishes before she stopped, dropping the pan in the soapy water and running toward the bathroom. I followed, worried, and heard her retching through the door.

“Hey,” I said, knocking on the door. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” she replied, but she sounded miserable. “I’m fine. Go away.”

I frowned, leaning against the door. “Uh, okay. I’ll leave some water by the door. Yell if you need me.”

I waited until I heard her soft reply before heading to the kitchen.

I filled up a glass of water and set it beside the bathroom door, then went to the bedroom and finally collapsed into the bed. Damn, it had been a long day. I lay there in the dark, my mind racing as I tried to process everything that had happened.

What the hell was I doing?

Whitney was my mate. My mate. She wavered between rejecting me and begging me to let her bite me. It made no damn sense.

I groaned, rolling over onto my side. I needed to stop thinking about it, but every time I tried to push it away, it came back stronger than before. I couldn't get the taste of her out of my mouth or the feel of her skin against mine out of my mind.

I hated it.

No, that was a lie. I hated the fact that I enjoyed it so much and that I wanted to do it again.

I wanted to make love to her over and over until she couldn't walk straight. I wanted to touch every part of her, kiss her everywhere, worship her body, and make her scream my name. I wanted to give her everything she could possibly want, to be the one that she trusted above all others.

But she didn't trust me. She wanted me, but trust was something different, and that stung.

After some time I felt Whitney crawl into bed with me, smelling of toothpaste. She sighed heavily. "I think I ate too fast is all, but I'm going to sleep. I'm exhausted."

I turned on my side, watching her silhouette in the moonlight. “Okay,” I replied, my voice low and husky.

“Goodnight, Julian,” she said, turning away from me.

“Goodnight, Whitney,” I whispered back.

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:40 am*

I was drifting in possibly the most satisfying night of sleep I'd ever had when the first buzz against my thigh woke me up. Confused, I patted my leg and felt my phone still in the pocket of my borrowed sweatpants but decided whatever was going on could wait until morning. My eyes drifted shut once more...

Only to snap open a minute later when my phone vibrated again, this time twice in quick succession. Someone was calling me, and that meant it was probably important. With a groan, I rolled over onto my back, reaching into my pocket and pulling out my phone. The screen was too bright in the dark room, and it took a few seconds for my eyes to adjust.

1 New Message

1 New Voicemail

My heart skipped a beat when I realized that it was after 3:00 am. Who would be calling me so late? And why did the number say 'private'?

I slid out of the bed as silently as possible, careful not to shake the bed and wake Julian. Thankfully he was sleeping just as deeply as I had been and only offered me a single snore as I crept out of the room and into the hallway, shutting the door behind me.

I held my breath as I pressed play on the voicemail, hoping that it was just a spam call.

But I wasn't so lucky. It was a man with a low, raspy voice. "This is the person that

has your friend,” he said, his words rushed. “You must come alone, or we will kill her. You have one hour.”

The line went dead.

What the fuck?

I stared down at my phone in shock, wondering what the hell was going on.

I opened the text message, dreading whatever it would say, and found a picture of Laura tied up against a tree with her mouth gagged. She looked pissed off and uncomfortable, but unharmed.

“If you want to see your friend again, come alone to these coordinates,” the second text said. I scrolled down to find a pin on a map. It was only about ten miles away, and I had no idea why they would choose to be so close. Then again, they were demons, and their kind liked to torment us. There’s no one else it could be.

I bit my lip as I considered my options, my pulse pounding in my ears. I could go get Julian, but what if Laura got hurt? I knew how to defend myself, and I had blades along with the charmed weapons in the car. I could do this.

I didn’t want to wait. They could be torturing her right now, or worse. No, I needed to act now. I wasn’t going to sit here and do nothing. I tiptoed back into the room, grabbing my bag and quickly changing into my own clothes. My jeans had dried, thankfully, but they still smelled like wet dirt. I shoved my feet into my boots, grabbing my keys off of the counter before heading to the front door.

My hand was on the doorknob when I hesitated, looking back at the stairs. Should I at least leave a note?

It took more time than I would have liked to find an envelope to write on and a pen, but I scrawled out the situation and placed it right by the front door so he could easily find it. Hopefully, if Julian followed me, I would have Laura safe already. If not...

I shook my head, not wanting to think about it. There was no way I was going to let anything happen to her. I wouldn't even let myself think about the possibility of her being hurt or worse.

I walked out the door and started the car, pulling up the directions to the coordinates that the text had sent me. The voice on the GPS warned me that the road was closed, but I ignored it as I headed toward the forest.

The roads were dark and quiet, which only served to make me more nervous. I'd been in many situations like this before, but something about this felt...off. I couldn't quite place what it was, but there was a feeling of dread building in my stomach as the minutes passed.

I pulled off onto a side road and finally reached a long, cracked driveway. In the distance, I could see an enormous house, pale like a specter in the night and choked with kudzu. It hadn't been occupied in ages.

I checked my phone to see if there were any new texts, but there wasn't. I sighed, leaning my head back against the headrest for a moment before opening the door and stepping out.

I walked to the back of the car and opened the trunk, taking stock of my weapons and grabbing more than I would probably need.

It was better to be prepared for anything.

I closed the trunk and then made my way up the drive. The house loomed ahead, its



windows like dark eyes watching me. I felt a shiver go down my spine as I approached the front door.

The hairs on the back of my neck stood up as I pushed it open, revealing a dark, dusty entryway.

I looked around, my heart pounding. I didn't see anyone, or smell anything besides dust and old wood. "Hello?" I called out, my voice echoing in the empty space. "Laura?"

There was no answer. I stepped further into the room, my eyes adjusting to the darkness. Near the back of the house was an open door, leading into the backyard. The picture of Laura had shown her outside, so maybe that was the direction they wanted me to go. I gripped the handles of my blades and wished Julian was with me before moving forward.

I crept down the hallway and into the back door, looking around cautiously. My eyes adjusted quickly to the darkness, and I could make out a large grassy area behind the house, surrounded by trees. There was a trail leading away from the house, into the woods, and I followed it carefully.

I walked for what felt like an eternity, the trail twisting and turning through the trees. My nerves were on edge, and every little sound made me jump. I had no idea where they were leading me, but I knew I needed to be prepared for anything. I just hoped that I would find Laura soon, and get us both out of there.

Finally, I spotted a light ahead, and my heart sped up. Was that them? I quickened my pace until I reached the clearing where they had Laura tied to the tree.

My friend was slumped against the trunk, unconscious or dead, I couldn't tell.

“Laura!” I shouted, racing toward her.

Laura’s eyes fluttered open, and when her vision adjusted and she saw me, she started to shake her head frantically, telling me no over and over again. I ignored her, but just before I reached the tree, I felt something strike the side of my neck, hot and painful like the sting of a giant bee.

I reached up to touch the spot, coming away with a small dart in my hand. What the fuck? I turned to look around me, but there was no one there.

It felt like my mind was swimming in mud as I tried to piece together what was happening. I’d come to rescue Laura, but this was obviously a trap. And now I was going to pass out. I swayed on my feet, falling first to one knee, and then fully to the ground.

I’d made a terrible mistake and now Laura and I both were going to die.

I should have woken Julian. I should have kissed him one last time.

I should have told him about our baby. He deserved to know.

As unconsciousness took me, I managed to lay one shaking hand on my belly just before the darkness swept everything away.

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:40 am*

No sound woke me up. Instead, it was the jolt of panic I felt rushing down my newly strengthened mate bond that jolted me out of sleep. I sat up so fast that the blanket went flying, and adrenaline was already dumping into my veins before I even knew what was happening.

I reached over to the other side of the bed where Whitney should have been lying, finding it empty and cold. She was gone, and it had been at least an hour since she'd left.

Where was she? Was she safe? Why had I fallen asleep and let her leave without me?

The thoughts were racing through my head as I leaped out of bed, my feet hitting the floor with a thud as I stumbled for my clothes. I yanked on my jeans and shirt, not bothering to do up the buttons before I rushed through the apartment trying to find her.

But in my heart, I already knew she wasn't there. When I reached down the bond, all I could feel was a fuzzy blackness and nothing more. The panic was the last clear emotion I'd been able to feel of hers.

I started to tear the place apart, looking for any indication of where she might have gone. I knew without a shadow of a doubt that my mate was in trouble and I had to find her.

The kitchen and living room were empty, but I still felt around for anything I might have missed. There was nothing, except for a small scrap of paper on the floor near the front door. I grabbed it, my heart in my throat, but the words didn't make sense at

first.

“Julian,” I read aloud, “I know you’re going to be upset with me, but I got a text from an unknown number with coordinates, and it’s Laura. She’s been kidnapped and I need to go save her.”

I stopped reading, crumpling the paper in my fist as rage burned through me.

Of course, she’d gone out on her own. She’d do anything for those she cared about.

My mate was stubborn as hell, and I was sure she thought that she could take care of herself, and most of the time, she was right. But alone? At night? It would be dangerous for even the most powerful wolf.

The demons were too strong, and they wanted her for something, I was sure. They wouldn’t give up easily.

I needed to find her and Laura, and fast.

I shoved the note in my jeans and buttoned my shirt, trying to keep my hands from shaking. Where in the hell could she be? I didn’t even know when she’d left, so I couldn’t even begin to estimate how far she could have gotten.

I cursed under my breath as I ran to the window, looking down at the street below. Her car was gone, which was to be expected, but it left me with no way to follow her. Grabbing the sword I had used earlier, I raced down the stairs, nearly tripping twice. I burst through the front door into the darkness, searching for any sign of them.

But there was nothing. Just the cool night breeze and the quiet chirp of crickets.

Fuck. I closed my eyes, inhaling deeply, trying to pick up her scent. But it was no

use. All I could smell was the crisp air as the world lingered between night and dawn.

The bond between us thrummed weakly, and I reached out for it, trying to get a sense of her direction. But it was useless; all I could tell was that she was still alive.

I opened my eyes, looking around frantically, trying to decide what to do. I had no idea where to start, but I knew that I couldn't just sit here and do nothing. I whipped around, deciding in the heat of the moment that I'd just have to steal a car, when a familiar-looking truck skidded into the parking lot.

It was Saul's truck. But Saul wasn't driving.

It was Laura.

For one brilliant moment I thought that if Laura was here, Whitney had to be in the passenger seat. But my hopes were quickly dashed when I saw it was empty as Laura climbed out and sprinted toward me.

"Where's Whitney?" we both yelled at the same time, our voices carrying in the quiet night.

Laura's eyes went wide as she shook her head. "I don't know, I thought she was with you!"

"I thought you were kidnapped," I replied, my mouth going dry as things went from bad to worse. "Whitney left a note saying she'd gone to rescue you."

Laura blanched, "My phone died in the middle of the night. I woke up and when I put it on the charger I saw that Whitney had called me a bunch of times, but she's not answering now, so I came here."

The demons knew what they were doing when they took my mate. They knew exactly what to do to push me past the point of reason.

They would pay. Every last one of them would suffer for taking away what was mine.

Laura looked around frantically. “We have to find her. Where is she, Julian? Use the mate bond!”

My lips curled up into a snarl. “You don’t think I’ve tried? Something’s blocking it.” My jaw clenched tight. “We’ll just have to find her the old-fashioned way.”

Laura looked at me with wide eyes. “You mean, start looking? But that could take hours. Where do we even begin—wait. Did she take the Outback?”

“Yes, why?”

“She has a tracker on the car, and I’m almost positive...” she tapped on her phone, a look of triumph coming over her face. “Yes! I have its location. She’s a little less than an hour away, come on!”

Laura was halfway to the truck when I stopped her. “Why are you driving Saul’s truck?”

“I stole it,” she said simply, and without remorse.

“What? Why?”

Laura rolled her eyes. “Because we need a vehicle and I wasn’t going to risk getting pulled over in a car I borrowed without permission. I, uh, never made it to the hotel. We ended up taking Peter to Danny first and it was so late that Danny told him and me to just stay at his and Naomi’s place. So I took his truck—it was the easiest one to

get out of the driveway. Now come on!”

I wanted to argue with her more and ask if she was insane, but I could feel time slipping away. The sun would be rising soon, and if the demons had Whitney then I needed to get her out of there before she was injured or worse. I followed Laura to the truck and hopped in the passenger side. We had a long drive ahead of us, and I knew every minute counted.

I reached for the bond again, and this time I felt a small flicker of emotion from Whitney. Fear and panic. My fists clenched, and I gritted my teeth as I forced myself to take deep breaths. I had to remain calm because I needed all of my focus if I was going to save her.

Laura drove like a madwoman, pushing the truck to its limits as we sped down the highway. I had to admire her determination and focus, even though it terrified me a bit. I was used to being the one behind the wheel, and having no control felt strange. I glanced over at her, studying her face. She seemed calm and determined, and I could see why my mate was friends with her. They were both strong, capable women who wouldn't back down from a challenge.

As we got closer to the coordinates Laura had found, my nerves grew. I tried to keep my breathing steady, but I couldn't help but worry about what we would find when we got there. The fear and panic I'd felt earlier had faded, and I had no idea if it was a good or bad thing. I needed to stay positive and believe that I would find my mate alive and well.

The sun was starting to rise over the horizon, casting a golden glow across the landscape. It was a beautiful sight, but I couldn't appreciate it with my stomach in knots and worry eating at me. I stared out the window, watching the scenery go by in a blur. My mind kept racing, trying to come up with worst-case scenarios, and I had to remind myself over and over again that I couldn't think like that.

Finally, we made it to the marked location where a long, winding driveway led back into the trees.

“Are you ready?” Laura asked as she put the truck in park and turned to me.

I nodded, reaching for the door handle. “Let’s go.”

We climbed out of the truck, and I took a deep breath, trying to calm my nerves.

I could do this. I would find my mate, and I would make sure she was safe.

With one last glance at Laura, I started down the driveway, my heart pounding in my chest.

We walked for what felt like ages until we reached an enormous old house that had obviously been abandoned for years. It was overrun with kudzu, and the windows were boarded up. Whitney’s car was parked out front, but otherwise, there were no signs of life.

I’d used Laura’s phone—figuring that no one wanted to hear from me—to send out the information we had to our allies. I didn’t expect any help, but if everything went to hell, at least they’d know where to find our bodies.

As we slid from the truck and crept toward the house, the front door swung open and two figures stepped out. Their identities were so unexpected that it took a minute for my brain to catch up with my eyes and process what I was seeing.

Because on the wraparound porch stood two of my wolves, Rick and Tanner. There was no way they should have been close enough to beat us here, but maybe they were on a delivery run when the warning texts had been sent out.



“Hey,” I asked, straightening from my crouch, “What in the hell are you doing here?”

Rick smirked, his dark hair falling into his eyes. “We came to help you rescue Laura.”

“That’s right,” Tanner added. He was just as tall as Rick but leaner and rangier. “We were on our way back from a delivery when we got your text.”

I shook my head. “How did you get here so quickly?”

“We took a shortcut,” Rick said with a shrug.

I knew something was wrong, but I wasn’t ready to admit it to myself until I felt Laura grabbing my sleeve. She spoke, her voice low enough so only I could hear her. “Julian...I’ve been hunting demons for a long time. They’re possessed. Both of them.”

Possessed. Demons inside my wolves. I’d been such a fool.

“How long?” I yelled, feeling the horror of the truth coming through. The same two wolves I had sent to sedate Naomi were demon-possessed. No wonder they’d tried to kill her. “How long have you tainted my pack?”

“Your pack and Danny’s pack,” Rick laughed. “Longer than you’d believe.”

I stepped forward, my shoulders tense. “I’m here to take what’s mine and leave,” I said loudly, keeping my eyes on them. “Don’t make this any more difficult than it has to be.”

Tanner scoffed. “You’re outnumbered, Julian. We have you surrounded.”

I looked around, realizing he was right. Demons were emerging from the woods, surrounding us on all sides. Laura cursed under her breath as she moved closer to me, her sword out. We were outnumbered, and the odds weren't in our favor.

"Let me go or we'll kill you all," I growled, letting my wolf come through in my voice.

Tanner just shook his head. "I don't think so." He stepped forward, his eyes gleaming oil-black as he let the demon inside of him take control. "But we do have a deal for you."

The demons surrounding us churned and skittered around, anxious for blood. Some of them looked mostly human still, while others were visibly rotting, but none of them looked as convincing as my two wolves.

"We have Whitney. She's knocked out but not poisoned. We will give her to you and you don't even have to give us a person in return. Instead, we want access to Silverfang Creek territory. Put us on the next patrol shift and just look the other way while we take what we've been searching for."

"They mean Faye and Sienna," Laura whispered anxiously. "What are we going to do?"

I was trying to think fast, but I couldn't focus knowing my mate was right inside that house, seconds from death if I made the wrong move. My heart was pounding and my wolf was pacing inside me, desperate to get to her. I knew I had to be smart about this, but it was hard to think when all I wanted was to rip the throats out of everyone who'd dared to touch her.

But there was no way I was going to let these demons get anywhere near Faye or Sienna. No fucking way. They would have to kill me first. I don't even know the

wolf-witch and her child, but I'm not a fucking monster, despite what everyone must think.

The demon in Tanner tilted his head as if he'd heard Laura speaking to me. "Don't let the she-wolf speak for you, Alpha. She isn't even one of yours. She's a Silverfang. Wouldn't the other Alphas make the trade if their mate was in danger? All we want is a chance to get inside the perimeter."

"I don't fucking think so."

"So be it. We can use your mate for our ritual, but Whitney has so little witch blood we'll need to bleed her dry for it to work. We'd have gotten many more uses out of the wolf-witch and her pup. Pity." Tanner cackled. "I hope you've said your goodbyes."

They moved toward us, their black eyes glittering with malice, and I knew that they would show no mercy.

"Get ready," I murmured to Laura. "They're coming."

Laura nodded, gripping her sword tightly. "I'm right behind you."

"And I'm beside you."

We stood back-to-back, preparing for the onslaught of demons.

"Now," Laura shouted, and we surged forward, fighting as one unit.

The demons swarmed around us, clawing and biting. One of them managed to grab Laura's leg, and she screamed in pain as it sank its teeth into her calf. I lunged forward, ripping the demon off of her and tossing it to the ground.

As I turned to face the next wave, I saw Tanner and Rick approaching me, their eyes gleaming with malice. Tanner laughed, his voice a twisted echo of his human tone. "You think you can fight us all? You're going to die here tonight, Julian."

Rick grinned, showing off his pointed teeth. "Your mate is ours now, and you will never see her again."

I felt my wolf rising up inside of me, growling and snarling for release. The need to protect my mate was stronger than anything I'd ever felt before, but I couldn't give up my human form. Not when I needed to get Whitney out if we managed to make it inside the house.

But there were nearly twenty demons around us. It was hopeless, I knew that, but I wasn't going to give up. I glanced out of the corner of my eye as Laura kicked a demon to the ground and stomped on its skull with her steel-toed boots, and my heart clenched in my chest. Whitney would want her to make it, even if I couldn't.

"Let me clear a path for you!" I yelled to her. "Get the fuck out of here Laura, it's useless!"

She looked over at me, her face smeared with blood and dirt, and I could see the resignation in her eyes. She yelled back, "No! She wouldn't leave me behind!"

I wanted to argue, but then the demons were swarming around us again and we had to fight for our lives.

Laura fought like a wild woman, slicing through the demons with her sword and screaming like a banshee. I could feel myself tiring as we fought off wave after wave of demons, and I knew that we wouldn't be able to last much longer.

The sky was getting lighter as the sun slowly started to rise, and the demons seemed

to grow stronger as the night began to fade. They attacked with renewed vigor, biting and clawing at us as they tried to tear us apart.

I'd failed my mate. I could still feel her teeth in my neck and I'd failed her so miserably. The rest of the Reckless Stalkers were hours away and hope was running out.

I squared my shoulders, tightened my grip on my sword, and prepared for my last stand. I'm sorry Whitney, I thought. I wish things could have been different. I wish I could have been the good man you needed me to be.

Just as the last bit of hope faded out of me, I heard a sound in the distance, quickly growing closer and coming up the driveway. A low rumble, but not with one origin, but many.

The roar of motorcycle engines, and the sound of tires on gravel.

When I realized what it was, I roared with my second wind, fighting back even harder than before.

Laura and I only needed to hold the line for a minute more, because the Red Canines had arrived.

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:40 am*

I fought for consciousness, but it just wouldn't come. I was aware of the hardwood floor under me, the musty-smelling air around me, and the sound of battles raging outside. But the poison from the dart was keeping me securely under, and it felt like I was floating in outer space.

But the floaty feeling was the better of the two situations I was facing because when the dreams came, they were both incredibly realistic and powerfully traumatizing all at once.

Over and over again I dreamt of the ones I cared for the most being killed. My parents, who had moved back to Norway long ago, freezing to death. Laura and the rest of my team being torn apart fighting demons, Faye and Sienna in demon clutches, and Julian having his throat ripped out by a shadowy, nameless wolf.

I tried to fight my way back to the surface, but there was no escape. I was trapped in a nightmare, and there was nothing I could do about it. In a fit of desperation, I reached for my mate bond, and then that tiny well of magic within me that I used for simple spells. The only power my witch blood had given me.

It didn't wake me up, but slowly, the nightmares faded and the dream changed. A bright figure appeared to me, stepping out of the darkness and pushing it aside like a heavy velvet curtain. She was impossibly tall and glowing, her beautiful body clad only in gossamer strands of light. She seemed to be made of sunlight itself, and as she came closer I could see that her features kept shifting between human and wolf.

"Whitney," she said in a voice like wind chimes. "You have to embrace your blood gift if you want to reach your full strength."

"I can't," I tried to argue, but my voice wouldn't work. I tried to lift my hands to touch her, but I was paralyzed.

"It doesn't matter if you only have a little witch blood—you can still get stronger. You need to train harder, and reach deep within yourself for the power that is waiting for you."

"Why? Why do I need it?"

"You must protect your child," the glowing woman said. "Your child is destined to be powerful, but they will need your guidance. You must embrace your blood gift if you want to save them from their fate."

"I don't understand."

She smiled, and her eyes were sad. "You will. In time."

"How can I save them if I'm just a hunter? That's not enough."

"It is. You are stronger than you know, Whitney Gray. The work will be hard, but at the end of it, there will be joy unlike any you've ever known. With the Alpha at your side, you are unstoppable."

I could feel the tears streaming down my face. "Okay. Okay. I will try."

The dream shifted again, and I found myself standing on a battlefield. The glowing woman was at my side. There were dead demons all around us, and the stench of blood was thick in the air. She looked at me and grinned, bloodthirsty—a goddess of light, and a goddess of battle, all in one.

"We did it," she said, gripping my arm. "We won."

I grinned back at her, relief washing over me. "We did it," I echoed. "We won."

"Now, inhale, and awaken."

I woke up in my mate's arms, gasping for air. It took me a moment to realize where I was, and what had happened. As my heartbeat slowed and my breathing returned to normal, I was able to take stock of my situation. I was inside the old, abandoned house, lying on the floor with Julian holding me. Laura was standing over us, a concerned look on her face.

"Whitney," Julian breathed my name like a prayer. "Whitney. Whitney. You're awake."

"I'm awake," I mumbled, my throat dry. I could taste something bitter on the back of my tongue and wondered if it was the sedative. Besides that, though, I felt...good. Strong, even.

"I need to get you out of here," he said urgently. "This is dangerous."

I frowned, trying to remember what had happened before I'd lost consciousness. I'd been attacked by demons, and I knew they'd wanted me for something. I looked beyond Julian and was shocked to see that a full-on war was being waged outside of the old house. "What in the hell—?"

"No time for chit-chat," A tall, thin figure brushed an angry Laura aside and knelt next to us. Saul grabbed my face and checked my pupils before Julian could protest, but Saul seemed satisfied and brushed his hands together. "She's fine. Give her a blade and let's end this."

"What are you doing here?" I asked.



Saul just shook his head. "That's a story for later."

"He's right," Julian said. "We have to stop the demons before they get inside."

My brain was still fuzzy, but the urgency of the situation was slowly dawning on me. If the demons got inside the house, it would be over for all of us. I pushed myself up into a sitting position, and then carefully stood. The floor was shaky beneath my feet, but I wasn't going to let that stop me. I needed to get back in the fight.

I saw Laura had her sword out and was standing guard in front of the door. There were growls and yells from outside, and I knew that we didn't have much time before the demons reached the house.

"Give me a weapon," I said, holding out my hand to Julian.

He frowned. "Are you sure you're okay? You were hit with a dart full of poison."

"I'm fine," I insisted. "Now give me a fucking knife."

He reached down and unclipped one of the many blades from his belt, placing it in my hands. I gripped the hilt tightly, feeling the familiar weight of the weapon in my palm. I took a deep breath, trying to push away the fear that was creeping up on me. I was still feeling a little lightheaded from the poison, and my vision was blurred at the edges. But I wasn't about to let that stop me from helping to fight off these demons.

"I can't let you fight," Julian said, his voice low and urgent. "You're not well, Whitney. You need to stay here and rest."

I glared at him, my blood boiling. "I'm not some fragile flower you need to protect. I can take care of myself. Let's do this."

Before he could protest again I rushed forward to join Laura, who took enough time to squeeze my shoulder affectionately and exclaim, "Glad you're back!" before running back into the fray.

Julian was beside me again, but he had given up trying to stop me. "Stay on the edges. We're almost done here anyway. And don't get far from me."

"I've got it," I growled, rushing forward to help Laura and a few others fend off the last wave of demons.

The demons were still coming at us, but they were clearly losing the battle. The sun had risen and the demons died in front of a stunning sunrise. We were surrounded by the pops of dying demons, and many of them were beginning to retreat.

"We're winning," Laura yelled over the chaos. "We've got them on the run now!"

The rest of the Red Canines cheered as the demons began to scatter, finally realizing that they were outnumbered. The ones who remained were quickly defeated, and soon we were left standing victorious in the blood-stained field.

"We did it," I breathed, hardly able to believe it. "Now...does anyone want to fill me in on what's going on?"

\*\*\*

Julian was attached to me like a tick after the battle, and barely let me help gather the wounded and offer help. Someone passed around bottles of water, and I sat in a loose circle with Julian, Laura, and Saul, who pieced together the last few hours for me.

The biggest shock was the large group of wolves around us—the Red Canines. I was sure every one of them would rather watch Julian die than fight beside him. "How'd

we go from 'get out by 7 am or else' to being war buddies?"

"Naomi." Everyone said at once.

Laura clarified. "Julian sent out a mass text—from my phone, since he's the world's most hated wolf—about what was going on. We never expected that she'd manage to rally the pack and send them out here, but it was a nice surprise considering we were about to die."

That made my stomach clench. "You should have left me and gone to get reinforcements."

Julian shook his head once, grunting. "Fuck no. They said they were going to bleed you dry for some ritual. There was no way I was leaving."

His words triggered something in my memory, snatches of words I had picked up when I was unconscious. "I heard them talking!" I gasped, nearly jumping to my feet. "They were talking about needing witch blood for a portal ritual, or something along those lines. I mostly heard 'witch blood' and 'portal' over and over again."

"Shit," Laura spat, turning to look at the others. "That makes sense."

The group was silent for a moment before Julian spoke up. "We have to go back into the house and see what they left behind. Once it's clear, we'll burn it to the ground."

We started to go over plans, Julian keeping a hand on my knee the entire time, and I was anxious to get away from the battlefield to confirm that the baby was alright. I still hadn't told Julian, and the guilt was eating me alive, but I wasn't going to risk telling him only to find out that the sedative dart had harmed the pregnancy somehow.

We were interrupted when a Red Canine member, still in his leather biker jacket, made his way over and pointed at Julian. "You. Danny wants to talk to you."

Everyone froze. "He's here?" Julian managed to ask. "Look, Man, I don't want to fight after all this—"

"Not a fight," the wolf said. "Just talk. Come on."

I was surprised that Julian would agree so easily, but after a brief hesitation, he rose from his place and followed the Red Canine, who led him over to a small group of men gathered under a tree. I watched as Julian was pulled into the middle of the group, and they began to talk in low voices.

"What's that about?" I asked Laura, who was sitting beside me.

She shrugged, her face unreadable. "Guess we'll find out soon enough. I'm going to go hover and see if I can pick up any of what they're saying."

When it was just Saul and I, I went to stand, hoping to do the same as Laura and prevent any altercations between the two Alphas if they arose, but Saul stopped me with a single word. "Sit."

I sat.

The intimidating-looking witch leaned forward, speaking in a low voice. "You've got to tell him you're pregnant."

"Who says I'm pregnant?" I asked, trying to play dumb.

"Please. You don't need a spell to know that you're knocked up."

"How did you know?" I hissed.

Saul smirked. "I didn't, until just now."

"Fuck," I muttered.

"I already had a suspicion. I've always been able to tell you had a slight magic gift, but it felt different. What are you going to do?"

I shook my head. "I have no idea. I haven't told anyone yet, besides Laura. I've barely had time to process it myself."

"He needs to know," Saul said, his voice firm. "It's not fair to either of you to keep this a secret. He might have been more careful and less reckless if he knew."

"No...he wouldn't."

Saul huffed a laugh. "Yeah, okay, you're right. But still. You're telling him. Now."

I glared at him, my anger rising. "I don't need you telling me what to do. I'm perfectly capable of making my own decisions."

He didn't back down. "Yeah, and those decisions almost got you killed today."

The words hit me like a slap in the face, and I stood up suddenly. "You can't talk to me like that. I'm not a child."

Saul rose slowly, and I had to admit, he was scary. He was tall and lean, and there was a certain power that radiated from him. He looked at me with narrowed eyes. "You're right. You're not a child. But you are acting like one. Stop being selfish and tell your mate the truth. The baby is fine, by the way. The sedative was harmless."

Relief washed over me. "Oh, thank—"

"Tell him. Now. Or I will." He looked over to the group of wolves, but Danny and Julian were standing apart from the others now. "Oh, and your bitch friend stole my truck. You owe me a favor."

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:40 am*

Facing Danny was like facing my own demons, and at first, we simply stared at each other. I'd never gone so long without seeing him, and I'd never seen him look at me with such pure, unadulterated hatred.

He was dirty from the fight but not nearly as much of a mess as I was. His wolves moved around us, trying to give us space while also keeping an eye on their Alpha in case he needed them. It hit me then how much they considered me an enemy, and what they thought I was capable of, as if I was going to attack Danny right then and there after his pack had come to my aid.

Finally, one of us spoke. It was Danny. "It's past 7 am."

I huffed a single, humorless laugh. "Yeah, well, extenuating circumstances and all."

"Right," he said. "You're fucking welcome, by the way. Now give me one good reason I shouldn't break your neck right here and now for what you did to my mate."

My chest burned at his threat—one I knew he would carry out—but I held my ground. I was not going to beg for forgiveness. That wasn't who I was. I'd explain myself if he gave me the chance, but I'd be just as happy to fight him if that's what he really wanted.

"As if you could."

Danny snarled, the whites of his teeth showing, but before things could go any farther, a blond blur stepped between us.

"Hey, so I know you're busy but I need to talk to Julian. Like, right now."

I almost laughed, but my wolf clawing to get out and fight the other Alpha in front of me took some of the humor away from the interruption. I gently took Whitney's shoulders in my hands before speaking. "Whitney. I just need a few minutes."

She shook her head, white hair flying. "No. No, we need to talk right now. Like, this exact second. Before I lose my nerve."

"Julian," Danny barked, "This is not a fucking casual catch-up."

I held Whitney still and searched her eyes while I carefully plucked at the mate bond. She was nervous, nauseous, and desperate to get something over with. She was being sincere, it wasn't just a ploy to get me away from Danny. "Five minutes, Danny," I said, never taking my eyes off my mate.

"Whatever."

I nodded and let her pull me away to a copse of trees, where the sounds of the pack were muted and the sun peeked through the leaves.

Whitney stopped and turned to look at me, her pale hair glimmering in the sunlight. Her eyes were full of emotion, and I could feel our bond vibrating with whatever she wanted to say. She took both my hands in hers, holding onto me like a lifeline, and said, "I wish we had a better moment than on a bloody battlefield, but I've waited too long already, and it would be so bad for you to hear this from stupid Saul instead of me, and—"

"Whitney."

She inhaled and exhaled slowly, letting her shoulders relax. "Right. Sorry. I, um, I've



never done this before, but...close your eyes, please, and look deeply into our bond."

"Whitney," I said again, more insistent. "What is this about?"

"Just do it!"

I wanted to argue, but instead did as she asked. I closed my eyes and concentrated on the bond between us. I had felt it grow since our initial mating ceremony, and it was now strong and vibrant. It glowed golden in my mind's eye, and I could sense all of her emotions as if they were my own. She was nervous but also excited. She was happy, and that made me smile, despite Danny being just ten feet away planning my murder.

"Okay," I said, keeping my eyes closed. "Now what?"

"Keep your eyes closed, but reach out," she instructed. "Seek the connection between us. Do you feel it?"

"Yes," I replied, the golden rope so clear that I thought if I reached out, it might be tangible.

"Now, pull back, and see what else is there."

I frowned, trying to understand what she was telling me, but then it was clear. There was a tiny, thin thread of gold next to the one that connected us. It was barely there, but it was glowing as bright as a star. My eyes flew open as my brain put together what it all meant. I could see the truth in her face, even before she confirmed it with a single word.

"Pregnant."

The word hit me like a ton of bricks, and I struggled to keep my composure. Whitney's hand tightened on mine, and I could feel her nervousness through our bond. Pregnant? That meant a baby...my baby. Our baby. I opened my mouth, but no sound came out.

I tried again. "Pregnant? Are you sure?"

Her smile was soft, and her eyes bright with unshed tears. "I took like twenty tests and got a blood test."

"Is it..."

"Yours, of course."

"No," I said, shaking my head. "I mean, is it okay? After the tranquilizer..."

Whitney bit her lip. "Saul said it was fine. I was only out for an hour."

My stomach sank. I hated myself for letting her go alone. I should have been there with her, protecting her. My mate...my pregnant mate. The words were foreign in my mind, but as soon as they settled in, I knew they were right. She was the mother of my child. She was mine. And I would never let anything happen to either of them again.

"Julian?" Her voice was low and nervous, and I realized I'd been silent for too long.

I fought to find some comforting words, a way to express how frustrated I was that she went out alone knowing she was pregnant, but apparently, the connections in my head were permanently shot.

So I yelled at her instead.

"Whitney, are you CRAZY? You're fucking pregnant and you thought trying to rescue Laura—who wasn't even kidnapped, by the way!—was a good idea?"

"Oh, that's rich coming from you, Mr. I do whatever the hell I want, when I want."

"I'm not the one who's knocked up!"

"Knocked up? Really?"

"Why do you always have to be so stubborn?" I snapped. "You should have told me you were pregnant!"

"And said what? 'Hey Julian, can you come help me fight a bunch of demons, oh and by the way, we're going to have a baby?'"

"Yes, exactly that," I growled.

"You promised NOT to hold me back from my job."

I could feel my eyebrow twitching. I'd never wanted to shake sense into someone and kiss them at the same time before, but Whitney was getting me there. "Pregnancy changes everything."

"That isn't your call to make!"

I tried to lower my volume. I really did. But I was incandescent with everything she was making me feel—joy, rage, endless frustration, and a confusing amount of lust—and control was beyond me. So when I yelled back my reply, it was loud enough that everyone on the battlefield could hear, and then some. "Dammit, Whitney, can't you see I want to protect you because I LOVE YOU!?"

Shock ripples through the crowd, hitting me just as hard as everyone else. Whitney is looking at me with her huge, flower-blue eyes, and I'm left reeling.

So much for my carefully made plan to make her fall for me first. I'm in love with Whitney Gray.

"—because I LOVE YOU!?"

Julian's words rang out in the clearing, and I felt a flush creep up from my feet to my face. I'd never run from a battle, no matter how dangerous or how badly the odds were stacked in my favor, but I suddenly wanted nothing more than to turn on my heel and run for the hills. Julian's admission hit me harder than any blow I'd ever taken, and I had no idea how to process it. My wolf was howling with excitement inside me, but the human half of me was frozen.

There was a murmur of voices around us, and I suddenly became aware of the dozens of eyes on us. "I, uh," I started but stopped when I realized I had no idea what I was going to say.

Julian opened his mouth, probably to apologize for his outburst, but instead turned to glare at the group of wolves from the Red Canines. "Don't you all have something else to do?" he growled.

I took advantage of the distraction to duck out of Julian's arms and head toward the house. Of course, it was pointless because he grabbed me immediately and pulled me close so he could speak into my ear. His voice was low and desperate when he spoke. "Please don't run from me again."

His words hit me in the gut, and I knew that he wasn't just talking about physically. He was talking about our bond—about my stubborn refusal to admit what I felt for him, and the way I ran away every time things got too intimate between us. I'd tried to tell myself it was for my own good—that I was protecting myself by being tough and pretending that I didn't want him or need him, but it was all a lie.

"I'm not running," I said, turning to face him.

"Then prove it." His hazel eyes were blazing, and I could see the frustration in his handsome face. He reached out to touch me, and despite my reservations, I swayed into his touch. Carefully, as if he was afraid to break me, Julian slanted his lips over mine, kissing me sweetly.

My resolve melted away, and I gave in, wrapping my arm around his neck. As we kissed, tears came to my eyes, and I laughed through them, thinking about how crazy this whole situation was. The bad-boy wolf who'd mocked my ideals, who drove me insane, had confessed his love for me. And I loved him right back.

"I'm sorry," I whispered when we broke apart. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner. That I hid the pregnancy."

"We'll talk about that later," he said, brushing a tear off my cheek with his thumb. "I know you had your reasons."

I nodded, unable to say anything else. Julian released me, and I stepped back. We stared at each other for a long moment, the silence stretching between us.

He reached out and took my hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. "I love you, Whitney. I don't know how we're going to make this work, but we will. Together."

My heart thudded in my chest, and I nodded again, not trusting myself to speak. When I finally managed to find words again, they came out as more of a squeak than anything else. "I love you too."

He smiled then—the first genuine smile I'd ever seen from him—and the effect was dazzling. My breath caught in my throat, and I had to remind myself that he was still Julian, the same man who infuriated me and pushed all my buttons. No matter how

handsome he looked when he smiled, I couldn't let him walk all over me.

I swallowed hard and took a deep breath, trying to settle myself. "This doesn't change anything, though. Not really. I'm not going to be part of some degenerate, drug-dealing pack. We're going to talk about this, and it's going to be an honest discussion. Not just you telling me what we're going to do."

Julian's smile grew even wider, and he wrapped his arms around my waist, pulling me tight against him. His lips were at my ear, and his voice was low and rough when he said, "Fine. But I won't apologize for being an asshole and not treating you like a delicate princess. I know you're strong enough to handle it."

"You think?" I grumbled.

He chuckled, but before he could say anything else, a familiar voice called out, "Okay, seriously, you two need to stop making goo-goo eyes at each other before I puke."

I stepped back from Julian just in time to see Laura coming up to us. Her hair was a mess, and she had blood all over her clothes and face, but she was smiling ear to ear. She stopped beside us and glanced between us.

"So this is really a thing?" she asked, pointing to me and Julian. "Because if so, you're going to have to deal with that," she said, nodding in Danny's direction.

I turned to look where she was pointing and saw Danny and the rest of his pack gathered together a few hundred feet away, watching us. The tension in the air was palpable, even from that distance. "Oh boy."

Danny had every reason to want to kill Julian, and considering my personal feelings for my mate, I couldn't let him do that. Julian wasn't a bad man—at least not

anymore.

"He only wants Julian," Laura clarified. "We're supposed to give them some space, apparently. And no more interruptions."

"Yeah, I don't think that's going to happen," I said, walking past her and heading toward Danny.

I heard Julian call my name, but I ignored him, focusing on putting one foot in front of the other. The distance between me and Danny was closing, and I could feel his gaze on me. He was angry, that much was obvious, and I knew he wouldn't hesitate to kill Julian if he thought he could get away with it.

I stopped ten feet away from Danny, looking up into his dark eyes. They were like a mirror, reflecting his anger back at me. He was covered in blood, just like everyone else, but unlike the others, his blood was only from demons.

"How's Naomi?" I asked, trying to break the tension.

"Don't try to change the subject," he snapped, crossing his arms. "If he can't stand still and talk to me like a man, I'm going to kill him."

"No, you're not," I said, glaring right back at him. "You're going to talk to him like a civilized person, or at least as civilized as two Alphas can be."

Danny frowned, and I could practically see him debating whether or not he could actually kill Julian and get away with it.

I reached out and poked him hard in the chest. "I know what you're thinking, and the answer is no. No murdering of my mate."



He looked down at where my finger was jabbing into him but didn't move a muscle. "You're really going to claim that low life as your mate, huh? And here I thought you were smarter than that."

"I'm not looking for your approval or anyone else's. Swear to me that Julian will come back to me in one piece after your little chat. If not...well, all I can say is that I'm not an enemy you want to make."

Danny's eyebrows raised. "Oh really? You think you could take me on?"

I grinned. "Not one-on-one, but I've got one hell of a team. Especially that one." I nodded toward Laura.

"She has a mean swing," he agreed, letting his arms fall to his sides.

"So...are we good? Or are you going to go all cave-wolf on me?"

"We're good." Danny sighed and ran his fingers through his hair. "I still can't believe you're with Julian. It's so...not like you. I know we don't know each other well, but Naomi talks about you all the time. You're some demon-hunting folk hero in her pack."

"People change," I replied.

"They do," Danny agreed, but there was a note of uncertainty in his voice. "I hope you two will be happy."

"Thanks. I appreciate that."

With that, I turned on my heel and went to find my mate. It was time for him to really speak to Danny, and I hoped at the end of it, there would be the hope for peace—if

not now, in the future at least.

## Page 22

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:40 am*

This time, Danny and I went for a walk away from the rest of the wolves. Emotions were sky high with Whitney openly claiming me as her mate, the rumors of her pregnancy, and all the adrenaline falling off from the battle.

It felt like old times...yet it didn't. I had killed something between Danny and me, and whatever it was was dead and buried, never coming back. But maybe an equilibrium could be found. Hate, but without violence. It wasn't what either of us had envisioned for our friendship, but it was what we had to work with.

Again, Danny spoke first. "The pack only mobilized because of Whitney. I'd never have been able to get the Red Canines out if it had just been you."

It hurt, but I'd expected it. "No surprise there."

Danny sighed and rubbed a hand over his face. He looked tired, but also heartsick. "Come on, Man. Can't you see how fucked up that is? You were my second less than a year ago, and now the majority of my wolves want you dead."

I shrugged one shoulder, letting his words roll off me like water. "It is what it is."

The silence stretched, broken only by the sound of our boots in the leaves.

"How..." I licked my lips before trying again. "How is Naomi?"

Danny turned on me in an instant, teeth bared, voice venomous, "Don't you dare speak her fucking name."

"Or what?" I shot back, refusing to be intimidated by the man who'd once been my closest friend.

He growled, and I saw his hand tighten into a fist at his side. My old packmate was itching for a fight, but I wasn't going to give him one. Not today.

We stared at each other for several long moments, the silence between us growing thicker by the second. Danny was breathing hard, rage radiating off him in waves, but he made no move toward me. Finally, I sighed and took a step back.

"I don't want to fight you," I said, forcing myself to keep my tone calm.

"Then leave. You're not welcome here anymore."

"I thought you wanted to talk. Let me guess, you expected me to grovel?"

"You should grovel." Danny snapped.

"I won't. But...I'll apologize if you'll hear me out."

Danny said nothing, but his eyes narrowed slightly. I took his silence as acceptance, and continued, "It was wrong to try and mess with Naomi. It was a stupid decision made in a fit of anger. I hadn't forgiven you for changing the pack so much—hell, I don't think I ever will—but trying to make you see your mate was vulnerable was one of the worst moves I could have made. It was a child's decision, not a man's. Not an Alpha's."

"If that was an apology, it was pretty shitty. You almost killed her. You've got some fucking nerve coming here after what you did."

I took a deep breath, trying to keep my temper in check. "You're right. I've got a lot

of nerve. But I'm also sorry. And I hope someday you'll be able to forgive me for being a selfish asshole. I know I screwed up, Danny."

His jaw clenched, and he looked like he was ready to attack me again.

"It doesn't change the fact that I ordered the poisoning, but I swear to you that I told them to use a mild sedative. I never, not in a million years, would have ordered them to use wolfsbane. But...I guess we see now why they did."

Danny stopped in his tracks. "What do you mean?"

"You must have been fighting elsewhere, but the ringleaders of that demon group were Rick and Tanner."

Danny sucked in a breath, his face growing pale. "Rick and Tanner? I knew they were the ones that hurt Naomi, but they were possessed? How didn't you see it before all of this shit went down?"

I couldn't believe what I was hearing, but if I had to walk Danny through the truth, I would. "Danny. Man. Think about what you just asked me. They were possessed when they were Red Canines...when you were their Alpha. So if you want to ask that question, then you need to ask yourself too."

"Shit." Danny cursed under his breath, rubbing a hand over his face. "You're right. Shit. I'm so fucking stupid. Why didn't I realize something was wrong? They were my wolves."

"We all missed it. And we both fucked up as Alphas by doing so—you were obsessed with Naomi, and I was obsessed with revenge and getting the Reckless Stalkers started."

"It was right under our noses."

I nodded, unable to think of anything else to say. We both looked like idiots, but I wasn't going to throw Danny under the bus anymore. We'd both messed up.

Silence stretched between us. I didn't know what to do or say, but I didn't want to leave yet. I wanted...I needed things to be right between us.

"Are you sure about Whitney?" Danny asked finally, breaking the silence.

"What do you mean?"

"She's..." Danny hesitated, "I don't know her that well, but she's kind of a...a warrior woman. She's going to resent you if you try to protect her."

"Ha. Yeah, she's told me that a time or two. But I'll figure it out." I laughed, but it was hollow. I wasn't afraid of Whitney being a warrior woman—she could handle herself in a fight, and I didn't doubt her abilities as a demon slayer. No, I was afraid of her resenting me for trying to keep her safe.

The walk back to the abandoned house was quiet, but before we crossed into the clearing to join everyone else again, Danny asked quietly, without a lot of the malice from earlier, "So you really didn't mean to try and kill Naomi?"

I frowned. "No, Danny. I might be an asshole, but I'm not a killer." Then, to break the tension, even just a little. "Hey, did you hear Laura stole Saul's truck?"

"Yeah. Because he had to ride bitch with one of the other wolves to get here."

We parted from each other laughing—not on good terms, not even close really, but there was a crack in the wall of hate on both our sides. And if I looked hard enough, I

could see a little light peeking through.

\*\*\*

One week later

It took a few days of rest to completely recoup, which Whitney and I spent in my old apartment eating, watching movies, and having sex. But we couldn't stay in our love nest for long, because the real world, and all of the danger within it, were calling.

After a lot of long talks, and tears on Whitney's end, we decided we'd give the whole mate thing a shot. In order to do that, she'd have to officially leave the Silverfangs and become a Reckless Stalker. I could see how much it bothered her, but my mate was brave. Plus, she'd have to take time off from her demon slaying while she was pregnant anyway—at least the slaying portion.

We couldn't avoid the Silverfangs forever, either. Whitney needed to pack her things, and we had to talk to Hector and Faye about the portal spell we heard the demons talking about. If anyone could dig up information on it, it was Faye. Plus, since she was the main target, she deserved to know.

The day of reckoning came sooner than either of us liked, but it was inevitable. We left the apartment early in the morning, picking up Laura on the way. It was a long drive north, but after this, we'd finally be free of other pack politics. At least for a little while.

Whitney had been silent most of the ride, and it wasn't until we were about ten miles away from the Silverfang Creek pack house that she spoke up.

"I'm going to miss it here," she said quietly, staring out at the trees as we drove through the forest.

“I know you are,” I replied, taking my right hand off the steering wheel and reaching for her. She put her hand in mine, and we laced our fingers together. I could feel the tension in her body, and I wished there was something I could do to make it go away. This was all new territory for me.

We’d talked about what being mates meant, but now that she was actually leaving the only home she’d known, it was obvious she was scared. And I couldn’t blame her. There had been a lot of change in a short amount of time.

I squeezed her hand gently, trying to be comforting. “We don’t have to leave immediately if you don’t want to.”

She shook her head. “No, we need to do this. I’ve been putting it off for too long already.”

My brave demon huntress. Funny what things were harder for her—she’d face down a hoard of demons without blinking, but when it came to those she cared for, all bets were off.

\*\*\*

We stayed with the Silverfangs for two days. It might have been longer, but everyone still hated me with a passion.

I didn’t care, though. I had the acceptance of the only wolf that mattered—my mate.

Faye was a good hostess, but Hector had a harder time pretending he was comfortable with me in his territory. But he was satisfied with the patrols I’d set, and it gave me a little leeway with the Silverfang Creek Alpha.

While Faye and Whitney talked baby stuff, it was decided she’d only take her



essentials back to Reckless Stalker territory and the rest would be packed into storage for her to get later. There was a tearful reunion, and then goodbye with the rest of her team, who she promised she'd still be happy to work with after the baby had arrived.

I wasn't so sure about all of that, but I didn't dare voice my thoughts in front of her.

I watched them all from afar, drinking a beer and letting them have their time together. It was hard as fuck, considering I didn't want to leave her for a second, but if I wanted to keep Whitney, I had to give her the space she needed. Even if it pissed me off.

Hector found me, coming to stand at my side with his own beer. Annoyance about my presence still rolled off him, but he really was making an effort. "She'll never settle down, you know. Not really."

"That's fine. If she roams, I'll roam with her."

Hector took a swig of his beer. "Not the best practice for an Alpha."

"I'll figure it out." I drank too, the liquid cold in my throat. "What I can't figure out is how to make this hurt less for her. It's fucking killing me to see her hurting so much about leaving."

The Silverfang Creek Alpha gave me a side-eye glance. "You can't. She might make a home in whatever hovel you've got your pack in, but this is also her home. She's going to be split for a long time."

"First, it's not a hovel. Second...fuck."

"You know," Hector's tone was casual...way too casual for what he was about to say. "She might feel more secure in all of this if you made things official."

I tapped my bite mark with my beer bottle. “We’re both marked, my man. It’s official.”

“No...I mean human official. Marry her. Make her a wife and a mate. Trust me, it makes a difference.” His voice went wistful, no doubt thinking about his wedding to Faye. “And the honeymoon. Whoo boy. Make sure you stretch beforehand.”

I was silent, mulling over his words. A wife and a mate.

I wanted to give Whitney anything and everything I could. If the title would make her happy, then so be it.

Whitney Payne. My wife. If I had been possessive before, that thought ratcheted it up tenfold.

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:40 am*

Faye and I had coffee—decaf for me, what a shame—on her porch while we watched the men load the small trailer attached to my Outback. I'd cried all my tears for the Silverfangs, my people, and my home, and now it was all just acceptance.

I was going to be a Reckless Stalker. That was done. But there were still more mysteries in my life that needed to be dealt with, and it just so happened that the woman next to me could help in a big way.

"Faye," I started. "I had this vision when I was knocked out before the battle. I spoke to...I guess a goddess? I don't really know, but it felt like a true vision. She told me I needed to embrace my witch's blood so I can be a good teacher for my child. Would you...would you train me after the baby is born?"

Faye smiled, and it was soft. "Of course I will, Babe."

It felt like a weight was lifted from my shoulders. "Maybe Sienna and I can be in class together. I promise not to cheat off her papers."

Faye laughed, but then she looked thoughtful. "I'll keep that in mind and make sure to warn her. But Whitney...I think I might not be the best first choice for you. Something tells me there will be another powerful witch much closer to you and Julian that can train you."

My immediate thought was that blue-haired amateur, Erin, and wrinkled my nose. "I'm not so sure..."

"Don't worry. I'll be here if it falls through, but just keep an open mind and heart,

okay?” Faye leaned in and kissed my cheek. “I’m really excited to be an auntie.”

I laughed, and we stood up together to hug each other tight. I still had my doubts about this whole training thing, but at least Faye was supportive.

It was time to leave. I wasn’t ready. Clutching Faye tighter, I whispered, “What if I changed my mind? What if I stay?”

She laughed gently, tears in her voice. “You won’t. I’ll see you soon, Whit. Be good.”

“I won’t.”

“I love you.”

“I love you too, Faye.”

\*\*\*

I lied earlier. I cried for a solid hour, leaving Silverfang Creek territory, which made Julian look like he was going to throw himself out of the car, but eventually, I settled and slept for most of the drive. It helped that Laura was driving down next week to spend some time with me and help me figure out where to put a nursery. It was a little bit of normalcy to look forward to.

I only woke up as we hit the dirt road leading to the cabin campsite, and found that I was actually glad to be back. The rustic little homes and the peace of the forest had their own charm, and I knew I could make it fit me better with each passing day.

But the cabins weren't the only things waiting on us. Naomi and Danny were there, too, leaning on their truck and waiting on us. I quickly looked at Julian, but he was

just as shocked as I was.

"What in the hell...?"

Naomi motioned for me to get out, bouncing excitedly on her heels, brown curls brushing her shoulders. The second my feet hit the ground she was hugging me, resting one hand on my belly.

"Congratulations! Oh, I can't believe it. A little Valkyrie."

I laughed, patting her on the back and looking over at Julian, who was now talking to Danny, looking surprised but not angry. "Yeah. I'm still coming to terms with it, but Faye says we'll be fine. I guess we have a lot to catch up on."

"You sure do!" Naomi linked her arm through mine, dragging me away from the truck. "You have to tell me everything. Are you really joining the Reckless Stalkers?"

I nodded, looking around at the little campsite. It wasn't what I was used to, but I could make it home. "Yeah. I need a change. And a baby? Ugh."

Naomi giggled, bumping her hip against mine. "Don't worry, I'll help you every step of the way. But first I think we need to join the men. Danny has...an offer."

"What?"

"You'll see. Just come on." Naomi started to walk toward our mates, but I stayed put for a second, just watching them. Danny moved immediately to stand between Julian and Naomi without thinking, and Naomi's cheerful expression fell when she saw my mate. The enormity of what he had done to her was heavy in the air around us, but Danny and Julian had taken the first step toward peace. Which meant I had to do the same.

Slowly, I joined Julian, wishing that I could hug Naomi to comfort her instead. We had to present a united front, but that didn't make it easy. Julian's hand slipped into mine, and when Naomi saw our fingers twine together, some of the uneasiness abated.

Okay. Good. We could do this.

"Let's just cut to the chase before this becomes even more of a pissing contest," I sighed. "Not that I'm not happy to see Naomi, but why are you two here? Isn't this enemy territory?"

Danny's face said that he wanted to argue back, but he kept his Alpha control in place and when he spoke it was steady and even. "The reason for our visit is twofold. I know that it's usually an offense to come to another wolf's territory without asking for clearance from the Alpha first, but I didn't want to leave anything up in the air."

When Julian didn't protest, Danny continued, "I'm here to be the first of the established pack Alphas to recognize you as an Alpha, Julian, and your pack the Reckless Stalkers as legitimate."

That was surprising, and it showed on my face. "But you've made it pretty clear you hate him."

"We're both still adjusting. I won't apologize for protecting my pack, but I also acknowledge that we have to move forward united against the real threat—the demons."

Julian nodded, swallowing hard. He was shaken, but trying his best not to show it. "Is that all you came here for? I appreciate it, but—"

"I also wanted to offer you a small pack territory on the border of the Red Canine's

territory. We held it originally, but the pack was spread too thin, so it's open. It's near the eastern border, I think you're familiar with it."

I watched Julian's expression, and whatever land Danny was talking about clearly meant something to Julian. I filed that thought away to ask about later. "Why would you do that?"

"We're stronger together, and anything that gives my pack and my mate extra protection is something I want to make work. Once the demon shit is dealt with, I would understand if you wanted to break off and try to exist independently again, but for the time being, we could exist as a strong alliance."

Julian looked over at me, his expression unreadable. "What do you think, Whit? You have more at stake here than anyone."

"It might be good," I answered slowly, thinking aloud. "Our territory isn't that great, and it's kind of isolated. If we were closer to Danny, we'd still be self-sufficient, but we'd have a better connection with the Red Canines. We'd have more eyes on our child."

"There's only one thing I need from you if we're going to move forward with this." Danny's expression was deadly serious, and the hopeful tone of the conversation changed. "I want you to apologize to Naomi. Right now."

I saw the tension roll into Julian's shoulders, but I wasn't surprised by the demand. Naomi had been hurt by Danny's order, physically and mentally. She deserved an apology. She deserved a lot more than that, actually.

Julian took a deep breath before bowing his head to Naomi in an uncharacteristic show of submission. As an Alpha, it was unheard of, but this was important enough for Julian to make an exception. "I'm sorry for the things I did to you. I'm sorry for

the way I treated you. It was wrong, and I know that now. I'm sorry for trying to make you appear weak in front of Danny. While I don't regret forming my pack, I regret that you suffered, Naomi."

Naomi sucked in a shuddering breath, and then bowed her head as well. "I accept your apology, Julian."

He took a deep breath and then looked back at Danny. "I accept the offer of territory, as long as it's okay with my mate." Julian turned to me. "Whitney?"

All of the pieces came together in my head. The witch that Faye spoke of must be Saul. I'd be close to Naomi, just like when we were both Silverfangs, and I wouldn't have to raise my baby far away from the pack that I trusted. "Yes. Yes, it sounds perfect."

Julian grinned, light-heartedly, and it was wonderful to see. Danny still looked grim, but I understood. Apologies might have been spoken, but a lot of time was still needed to see if they would ever get along again.

My mate looked between me, Danny, and Naomi, and laughed to himself. "Well, I had planned on making this a little more romantic, but seeing as we're planning our future, this seems like the best time I could hope for."

My heart shot into my throat, and I turned to face him as he reached into his pocket. The look on his face was so soft, so sweet, that it took my breath away. This was the Julian that I could see myself spending a long time with.

"Whitney," he began, going down on one knee and opening the box, "Would you do me the honor of becoming my wife?"

Naomi gasped, covering her mouth with her hands. Meanwhile, I was dumbstruck,



even as Julian took my hand and waited for my answer. Finally, I found control of my tongue again. "Yes! Hell yes."

I'd never really thought about getting married, but it was a lot easier to say yes when I knew what it would mean. That Julian and I were serious about each other. That we wanted to stay together. That we wanted to raise our baby together.

The ring he slid onto my finger was beautiful, a simple white gold band. It was perfect.

He kissed my knuckles, still smiling. "I hope that you never want to take that ring off."

I laughed. "Maybe if I want to kill something."

"No bloodshed for at least nine months," Julian warned. "No hunting demons or fighting while you're carrying our child. Promise me."

I leaned in and kissed my soon-to-be husband, holding him tight. "Yes, yes. Fine."

Stoic Danny finally cracked, shaking Julian's hand while I hugged Naomi tightly. There was still so far to go, but now I knew we had a place to start. A world we could build together.

Three weeks later

I didn't want to wait, and Whitney didn't want to show too much in her wedding dress, so we planned the ceremony for three weeks in the future. Whitney's parents swore to come back to the States after the baby was born, where we'd have another small reception with them present.

It was chaos, moving the pack and planning a wedding, but for once the fact that everyone despised me worked in my favor. Anyone coming to the ceremony besides my wolves were there for her, and the small size allowed us to have it close to home—the Red Canine's community garden. It was the one thing Danny offered to help me with, and I took it.

It was a small group. Danny and Naomi, Peter, Laura, the rest of Whitney's team, my wolves, and Faye and Hector, but it was all we needed.

The women strung fairy lights from the trees and floating lanterns that hung low over the flower boxes. A white arch was built and wrapped in ivy, and I was fitted into the first real tuxedo I'd ever worn in my life.

I had no idea what kind of dress Whitney would wear, but I didn't care. The only thing that mattered was that she'd be walking toward me and saying 'yes'.

There was no priest, but our old Alpha and the man who raised me, Peter, would preside over the wedding instead. We were wolves, we were shifters, and the ceremony was simple and intimate. It took place during the evening, with the sun setting and painting the garden in warm oranges and pinks.

There was a lone violinist playing a simple tune as I walked up the aisle and took my place at the front. She played slow, but it seemed to echo all around us in the openness of the garden.

And then she appeared.

I watched as Whitney stepped out from behind a large hedge, and my breath caught in my throat. I wasn't sure what to expect, but I knew it wasn't this.

The dress was white, a simple sheath that flowed down to her feet. It was sleeveless, but there was a high neckline that came up to the middle of her throat, and it was adorned with small, clear jewels that sparkled as she moved. When she shifted, I could see it was backless, and her hair was pulled up into an elegant, braided bun. Her makeup was soft and natural, and her eyes were bright as she looked at me. Best of all, I could see the tiniest swell of her belly, where our baby was growing inside of her.

It was perfect. She was perfect.

My mate slowly walked up the aisle, a bouquet of white and red roses clutched in her hands. The closer she got, the wider the smile on her face became until she was positively glowing.

Her gaze never left mine.

When she reached the end of the aisle, Peter began to speak.

I barely heard what he said. All of my attention was on Whitney, my Viking bride, my queen. I loved her. God, did I love her. Even when she was kicking my ass, I loved her. Even when she was yelling at me, I loved her. I would love her until the day I died.

There was a pause, and Peter looked over at me. "Julian, do you take Whitney Gray as your mate?"

The answer was so easy. "Yes."

"And do you promise to protect her, provide for her, and honor her until the day you die?"

"Yes."

Peter turned to Whitney and asked the same questions.

"Yes," she replied, eyes shimmering with happy tears.

Peter grinned. "By the power vested in me as the retired Alpha of the Red Canine pack, I declare you husband and wife. Kiss her, Julian."

I didn't need to be told twice.

\*\*\*

There wasn't going to be a honeymoon, not with Whitney being pregnant and the demon attacks so out of control. We laid in bed night after night talking about where we would go when it was safer, and had a list a mile long. I didn't really give a fuck, what was the difference between one beach and the next? But Whitney liked the idea of being somewhere warm, relaxing, and most importantly, alone.

I couldn't give her a honeymoon, but I could give her something else.

While Naomi and the girls had prepped the garden for the wedding, I'd actually been busting my ass working on a project that would set the stage for the rest of our lives.

Once the ceremony was over, we made a quick stop at my apartment to pick up our things and then left the packlands to cross into the new Reckless Stalker territory.

"Where are we going?" she asked, yawning sleepily, the bouquet she'd carried during the wedding still clutched in her hands.

"It's a surprise. You'll see." I turned down the road leading into town and then took the exit toward the old Payne house. There were still houses out here, but they were spaced out, each one with large tracts of land behind them.

I pulled into the long driveway, which was paved with stone chips, and parked. Whitney was sitting straight up now, looking out the window at the old house that had been carefully fixed up to look like it did decades ago. "What's this?"

"My home." I put the car in park and opened my door, moving to get the suitcase out of the trunk. "Our home. Come on. I want to show you around."

Whitney got out of the car slowly, and I could see she was having a hard time taking it all in. The Payne house was two stories, built in the late 1800s, and kept up as well as possible. My grandparents had been the last ones to live in it, and while I'd inherited it after my parents went to prison, I'd never wanted it.

Not until I had a family, that is.

"It's beautiful," Whitney said quietly, standing next to the car. "Is this really ours?"

I took her hand and led her to the door. "Yeah. Come inside, and I'll show you."

She squealed when I swept her into my arms and carried her over the threshold. The interior of the house had been redone while we were busy getting ready for our wedding, and now it looked like it did when I was a kid. I set her down, and she

walked slowly into the large living room, looking around.

The walls were a soft blue, with dark, exposed beams on the ceiling. There was a brick fireplace, a large sectional sofa, and an old wooden rocking chair in front of the hearth. The windows were large and framed with curtains, but I'd left them open to let the cool, evening air in.

"Julian," she breathed, "How?"

"Everyone helped. Everyone from all three packs. While you were training with Faye, we all worked on it. It's your wedding gift. I can't offer you a big pack, or money, but this was mine and—"

She was kissing me between one breath and the next, her arms wrapped around my neck. I held her close, breathing in her scent. She was happy. She was here.

I'd done the right thing.

"Thank you," she whispered against my lips. "Thank you."

We spent the next hour exploring our new home, ending with the bedroom on the second floor. The bed was massive, and covered with a thick down comforter. There were a million pillows on it, but they were tossed aside so that we could climb in.

I laid her out beneath me, pulling her dress away slowly. It was beautiful, and I wanted to take my time. I'd never seen Whitney wear a dress before. She didn't have to, and her clothes were normally functional for her job. She rarely wore makeup either, preferring a more natural look. But tonight, for our wedding night, she'd dressed up, and I appreciated every effort she made for me.

"You're beautiful," I whispered, kissing along her neck. I loved how strong she was,

and how she didn't hesitate to kick my ass when I needed it. Her body reflected her hard work, and I wanted to worship it fully.

I ran my hand along her leg, moving from the curve of her ankle to her thigh. She was wearing a garter around her leg, and I pulled it off slowly with my teeth, watching her face flush at the action. She was so perfect, and she was all mine.

Whitney was already wet, her legs spreading as I pressed my lips against the inside of her knee and started to kiss a trail up her thigh. Her arousal was heavy in the air, and I loved seeing the blush rise on her cheeks.

My fingers slid between her folds, rubbing her clit slowly and watching her eyelids flutter. "God, you're so wet for me. I could barely keep my hands to myself today, with you walking down that aisle looking like a goddess. Do you know how hard it was to not carry you away and have you all to myself?"

"I wanted you to. I would've let you."

She was so soft and pliant beneath my fingers, her body responding to my every touch. I kissed her inner thigh, leaving small nips that would fade as soon as they appeared. Whitney's back arched off the bed when my tongue replaced my fingers on her clit, and she let out a low moan. "Julian..."

"That's it, Love. Let go for me."

Her hands were in my hair, her nails scraping my scalp as I slowly tortured her with my tongue. Her hips moved against my face, but I held them down with one arm while I slid a finger inside of her, and then another. She was hot and tight, and I couldn't wait to slide my cock inside of her.

My free hand slid up her stomach, over her ribs to her breasts. Her nipples were hard,

and I flicked the sensitive nubs with my fingers, getting a little gasp out of her as I did so.

I curled my fingers, pressing against that spot inside of her that drove her wild. My wolf wanted to rise, to bite her and mark her, but I wouldn't give in to him yet. Instead, I focused on pleasuring my mate, giving her everything she needed until her body gave out.

And then I'd give her more.

I kissed her clit, my tongue flicking the swollen nub. Her legs were shaking, and I could feel her tightening around my fingers. I kept moving them, in and out of her as my tongue kept up the same pressure on her clit.

"Oh...oh god." Whitney's hands pulled at my hair as she came for me, her cries filling the room. She was so sweet, so delicious, and I could feast on her forever.

I didn't stop even after she came, working her through her orgasm and into another. Only when she was fully sated did I let up, crawling up her body to capture her mouth in a searing kiss.

"I'm going to take you now," I whispered, spreading her legs further. "I'm going to take you, and mark you, and make you mine."

Her hands gripped my shoulders as I thrust inside of her, my cock sliding home with one smooth stroke.

"Mine," I growled, pulling my hips back and then thrusting forward again. "You're mine."

Whitney nodded, her hips moving in time with mine. "Yes."



I kissed her hard, biting down on her lower lip as I claimed her fully. We were locked together, two pieces finally made whole.

My mate, my everything.

"I want to be on top," she murmured into my ear, her hot breath making me shiver.

I'd never had a woman say that to me before, and the words shot straight to my cock. "As you wish."

I rolled us over so that Whitney was on top. She smiled down at me, and my breath caught in my throat. I could stare up at this woman forever, and still never get bored of how beautiful she was.

My hands moved down her body, gripping her hips and pulling her closer. She leaned over me, her breasts brushing against my chest as she started to move. I let her have control, her long hair brushing against my skin.

She was slow, deliberate, her hands on my chest as she rode me. She leaned forward, her lips meeting mine, and we kissed each other hungrily. I could feel myself getting close, and I gripped her hips harder, moving her faster.

Whitney cried out against my mouth as I came inside of her, my cock filling her completely. My teeth were sharp as I bit her shoulder, leaving another mark there. She was covered in them, but I loved seeing them all over her. I loved the reminder that she was mine.

We healed quickly anyway. We were wolves, after all.

We were both panting hard as she collapsed on top of me, her fingers tracing lazy circles on my chest. "I love you," I whispered, kissing her forehead.

"I love you, too." She looked up at me, smiling softly. "Let's shut the world away for the next week. We'll have our honeymoon here. Just us and the house, okay?"

"You had me at 'shut the world away', Sweetheart."

She fell asleep soon after, curled up against my side. The moon was high in the sky, casting a soft white glow across our bodies. I kissed the top of her head, breathing her in. My mate.

My wife.

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:40 am*

There was no wedding afterglow for me. Sure, the week we spent alone after the wedding was heavenly, but once it was over, we were all right back to work.

And since I couldn't demon hunt in my child-carrying state, that meant I got turned over to Saul for training while Julian worked on getting his pack transferred over and tracked down any new demonic leads.

It only took me two days to wish I had stuck with Faye as my witch trainer.

The man was...a lot. And he pushed me harder than I had ever been pushed.

After a particularly brutal afternoon training session, I flopped down into a chair at the dining room table and put my head in my hands.

Saul was a great teacher, but he was so damned intense.

The witch stood in the kitchen, making us both cups of tea while I tried not to pass out from exhaustion. We never did physical work, it was all mental, but even that was draining me at this point. "Do you want to tell me what's wrong?"

"I'm just tired," I sighed.

It wasn't a lie, I really was exhausted. I was six months pregnant now, and the baby was big. I'd had an ultrasound a couple of weeks ago, and they'd estimated the baby would be about nine pounds at birth.

It hadn't been easy carrying, either. I was having a hard time getting comfortable and

sleeping, and when I wasn't tired, I was hungry. All the time. The doctor said that everything was normal, but it didn't make it any easier to deal with.

Saul dropped the cup of tea next to me and took his seat. "I think we're done until after you've had the brat, Whitney. It's too much."

Oh no. I knew what would happen when training was over. "But—"

"No buts. I'm on Danny's payroll, not yours. It's time for you to start your reading."

I groaned, looking over at the enormous bag of books waiting in the corner for me. Hector had dropped them off last week from Faye, and I hadn't even bothered to unpack them from the bag. Saul had told me to read a few, and then we'd talk. I had no idea how many were in the bag, but if I had to guess, it was at least thirty.

From what Faye had told me, it was a mix of basic teaching books and some old dusty tomes that she had found in her family's personal library and hadn't had a chance to go through yet.

There was no way I would get through all of that before my due date.

"I'll help you," he said, sipping his tea.

"You will?" I looked up at him, surprised. This man had been working me to the bone since he got here, and now he wanted to help me? What was the catch?

"Sure. Why not? I don't have anything better to do."

I eyed him warily. "That's very...nice of you. Thank you."

"Don't mention it."

"Okay. So...now what?"

"Well, let's see what we have." Saul got up and grabbed the bag of books, sitting back down at the table. He dumped the contents out onto the wood surface, and we both stared at the mess.

There were at least twenty books scattered across the table. Some were thin, but most were quite thick. A few were old and worn, the spines cracked and pages yellowed with age.

"Oh. Great," I sighed, staring at the pile. "So, what's first?"

Saul pushed a couple of books aside and pulled two from the center of the pile. "These two. The rest...I'll look through to see if they're helpful." He handed me one of the books. "You should start with this one."

I took the book from him, looking at the worn cover. It looked ancient but was clearly taken care of. The pages were clean and crisp, and the spine was free from damage. The title was printed in faded gold, but I could still read it.

The Art of Spells: An Introduction to Witchcraft.

"Really?" I asked, flipping the book open. "You know I've been using small spells forever."

"Tough shit. Get to reading, preggo."

I sighed heavily, but knowing that there wasn't really any way out of it, flipped to the first page.

\*\*\*

We found the portal spell a week later in an unmarked, faded, leather-bound book.

It was late afternoon on a Sunday, and I had been taking a break from studying to read a novel in the living room. My eyes were burning from staring at the small, weird print all day, so I'd thought a few chapters of a murder mystery would do me good without being too distracting.

Saul had been at it since dawn, sitting at the table with a pile of books next to him. He was the type of guy who just plowed through whatever task was put in front of him, never stopping or complaining.

In a way, I envied him. If I tried to keep up with him, I would've burnt out long ago.

The sun was beginning to set when I joined him once more and picked the tome at random. I'd quickly discovered that Saul had offered to read through everything because Faye's collection was much more eclectic and rare than his own. He was taking advantage of the opportunity, but I didn't mind.

It was on page 85 that I found the portal spell, and simply seeing the title made my blood run cold. "Oh my God. Saul. I think this is the spell I heard the demons talking about."

The witch looked up, peering at me over the rim of his glasses. "You sure?"

"I don't know, but it sounds familiar."

He got up, leaving the book open on the table as he walked around to stand next to me. His gaze moved across the page, lips moving silently as he read along.

I leaned back in my chair, watching him. Saul finally finished reading the page. "Okay, this is definitely what the demons want."

"How can you tell?"

"Because it's one of the only spells that open a portal between worlds. All the others just go between dimensions within the same world. It's rare and complicated to do, which makes me think this isn't their first rodeo."

"What does it do?"

He looked over at me, his dark eyes serious. "It creates a portal to the underworld."

A chill went through me, and I swallowed hard. The underworld. Demons weren't just hellspawn. They came from another plane of existence, and all the evidence pointed toward it being a literal hell. If they opened a portal to that place...

"I'll call Faye and Hector to see if they can come take a look at this."

"Good plan. I'm going to go home and contemplate the end of the world."

I watched the witch leave, trying to subdue the sense of dread coming over me. There was no point in dwelling. With my chest tight, I picked up the phone and called Faye.

\*\*\*

Three days later, Julian and I were leaving Danny's house, where Faye, Sienna, and Hector were staying for the night. We'd been going over the spell tome for hours and decided to pick it back up again in the morning.

It was nice having the family around, especially Sienna. She was such a bright and beautiful little girl that it made me all the more excited to have my baby with me in just a few short months. We still didn't know the gender—stubborn thing wouldn't ever turn the right way for the ultrasound—but I couldn't care less.

Julian was quiet as we drove home, but that wasn't unusual. He wasn't much of a talker, which I appreciated. The pregnancy had made me more tired than normal, and while I loved talking to him, I just didn't have the energy most nights.

I'd been doing some thinking lately, and tonight seemed like a good time to bring it up. "Jules? Can I talk to you about something?"

"Of course." He looked over at me briefly before turning his attention back on the road.

"So...I've been thinking about what I want to do when the baby is born."

"You're going to go back to hunting, aren't you?" he asked. His tone was casual, but I could sense a hint of disapproval underneath the words.

I shifted in my seat, suddenly uncomfortable. This conversation could go one of two ways. Either Julian would be happy to have me back out there with him, or he would try and make me stay home like every other mate of a wolf. "I think so."

"I don't think that's a good idea."

I sighed heavily, trying not to get annoyed with him already. "Why? Because I'm a woman?"

He chuckled. "No, Whit. I just think you should take an extended break from hunting to be with the baby. Six months, eight months, maybe even a year. Give yourself time to rest and recover and bond."

It...wasn't the worst idea. It would give me time to get a handle on my magic before going back out, and I needed some time to form a new team now that my old one was back with the Silverfangs.



"I'll think about it," I conceded, turning to look out the window. We were getting closer to town, and I could see the tops of houses coming into view. "Do you want more after this? Kids, I mean."

"Yeah. I want at least three or four."

That was a lot. Four children seemed like a lot. But maybe...maybe it wouldn't be so bad. With the right person. I'd been an only child growing up, so it might be fun to have a big family.

"What about you?" he asked. "What do you want?"

"I want kids. Definitely." I paused, trying to find the right words. "But I also want a safe world to raise them in, you know?"

"I get that." He nodded, tapping his fingers on the steering wheel as he thought. "I could...wait a couple of years to have more. Until this mess with the demons is sorted out."

"Okay. Yeah. I agree." Julian pulled into the driveway, and I made the effort to haul my pregnant self over the seat to get into his space, taking his face in my hands and kissing him thoroughly. "Thank you."

"For what?" he asked, grinning at me, still a little dazed from the kiss.

"For being understanding about this."

"I do have one condition, though," Julian said in mock seriousness.

"Oh?"

"We keep practicing the whole...mating thing. A lot. So we still know what to do

when we're ready to have more."

I laughed, kissing him again until we were both breathless. "I think that can be arranged. You want to start now?"

Julian chuckled, nipping at my bottom lip. "Fuck yes. Let's go inside."

So we did.

\*\*\*\*\*

THE END