



The Alpha's Lunar Crown (Eternal Oath Saga #3)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: When my mate dumps me in front of two entire packs, it can't get worse—until I realized I was pregnant.

Seadon

Our engagement was meant to unite two werewolf packs.

Then one accusation turned me into public enemy number one.

I thought my mate would stand by me—instead, he ended our bond in front of everyone and left me to bear the blame alone.

With no other choice, I fled to the human world, raising the little one whose fuzzy ears pop out at the worst times. I thought I'd finally outrun the wolf-pack drama—until danger found me again.

And guess who shows up like a hero? The same alpha who walked away.

He swears he'll clear my name and protect me, but there's something he doesn't know.

There's a tiny pair of eyes watching him from behind the door—our son.

Alex

When betrayal came knocking, I sacrificed our future to keep her safe, never realizing it would haunt me forever.

Now I'm back to fix what I broke and restore her standing in the pack, determined to win back her trust.

But as I fight to clear her name, I found a secret that may change everything—a child who's the spitting image of me.

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Aurora

"Miss Belmont?" a gorgeous redhead walks into the reception area, her eyes scanning the faces in the room.

I slowly raise a finger, gaining her attention. "That would be me." All eyes turn to me, and I try not to let the attention frighten me. You've been to a lot of interviews at world-class companies, Aurora. This should be a walkover for you. I mentally encourage myself, willing my nerves to calm down. It doesn't work, and my ever-working brain chooses the moment to remind me of how my past interviews might be high profile but don't compare with this in importance. The very fabric of my future hangs on this.

She condescendingly gives me a once over, her eyes indiscreetly trailing from my hair to my toes before coming to rest briefly on my eyes. She ticks the file she was clutching to her chest. "This way, the personnel officer is expecting you."

She turns on her heels, and I follow, feeling anxiety slowly creeping over me. Despite spending a great part of the previous day watching multiple interview videos on YouTube and Lucien assuring me that I would do great, I feel my palms growing sweaty and my chest tightening. I wipe my hands on my shirt, the movement disguised as a quick adjustment of my red silk shirt and not the nervous wreck I currently am. Over the years, the shirt has come to be my personal rendition of a hero's cape. I always get a lot of compliments whenever I wear it. Paired with my black suit pants and a cheap imitation of Louboutin's red bottom, it is safe to say I am dressed to kill. But with every step that brings us closer to the personnel officer, I feel less like a predator and more like prey.

The redhead stops in front of an intimidating wooden door with the words "conference room" written in elegant cursive strokes hanging on top of it. My heart races with anticipation, and my nerves grow erratic, firing nervous impulses through me.

One of the most emphasized points in every video I've watched for my interviews is the power of body language and how inferiority can be sniffed from miles away, so I straighten my spine and raise my head. Despite nature dealing me a losing hand in this venture, I am determined to make this a success. This is my longest and biggest dream. Many things in my life have only served to lead to this moment. I can't mess it up.

"Good morning, ma'am. This is Aurora; she applied for the role of the assistant financial advisor," the redhead announces as we step into the conference room. A middle-aged woman who looks stern in her pleated Chanel suit and tight chignon sits at the head of the table, observing me through the bottom of her lenses.

"Thank you, Jenny. I'll take it from here." Her voice is flat and monotonous, giving nothing away.

"Good luck," Jenny whispers before slipping out of the room, her words sounding more like mockery than goodwill.

The temperature of the room drops by a few degrees following Jenny's departure. The personnel officer continues to scrutinize me without a word. Clearing my throat, I decide to break the ice. "Good morning, ma'am. I'm scheduled for an interview today." I inject an extra amount of sweetness into my voice in case she has a quick temper.

"I already got that bit. I wonder how long you intend to stand there before pitching yourself."

Pitching myself? How am I supposed to know I am to start when she barely offers me a word of greeting?

"Sit." She commands softly, and my feet move on their own accord, settling me into a chair close to her. She clasps her hands on the table, leaning in to rest her chin on them. "Tell me, Aurora, why should I consider you as an assistant finance officer?"

A smile creeps to my face. This is exactly the question I hope to hear. It's a chance to sell myself and display my outstanding academic performance and experiences. "I graduated at the top of my class in both high school and college, and my top scores were always in statistics, economics, and finance. Through multiple internships and fieldwork, I've been able to fine-tune my—" "I know all about your academic prowess and multiple awards." She cuts me short, leveling me with a look I cannot decipher. "What I want to know is why the pack should trust you with its finances." The question is different from what I prepared for, but I understand the necessity of it. Whoever handles the finances of the pack controls a lot of things, and as much as degrees and awards are a huge deal, trust and reliability are also paramount.

"Mrs.?"

"Kingston," she replies. "Anna Kingston."

I nod, picking up from where I stopped. "Mrs. Kingston, I understand the need for someone who can be trusted; that's why I'm here. I believe I can be an asset to the pack if I'm hired. With me on the finance team, you won't have to worry about inconsistencies. All transactions will be transparent. I'll develop a system to ensure that, and I'll devote myself to the financial growth of our community. I'm certain I can make incredible changes in record time. I only want the opportunity to show that the pack's finances will thrive with me on your team."

She let out a slow "hmm," leaning into her chair and watching me closely. Her eyes

feel like visible weights on my shoulders. If this is some intimidation tactic, I'm afraid it's working on me. My wolf is practically shrinking beneath the dominant weight of her eyes while I try to keep myself from visibly squirming in my seat. Tough luck.

A long minute passes before she finally says something. "Aurora, your grades are beyond impressive, and the same goes for your experience, but I'm afraid the pack is looking for something slightly different at the time. We need someone who can display both intellectual and physical strength and someone who cannot be forced into submission. Do you understand?"

I blink, letting the meaning behind her words sink in. So, this is what the stare-down was about. My mother is human, so I am not a pure-blood shifter. But I am still a shifter. Certainly not as strong as the pure-bloods, but I doubt that has anything to do with my ability to do a good job. It's not as if I asked to be allowed to defend the pack in some great war.

"I do have somewhere you can thrive." She picked up a file I hadn't noticed lying in front of her and slid it over to me. I quickly peruse the document, and a wave of humiliation and disregard hits me with every word.

"The domestic workers around here appear to lack structure, and I was hoping that, with all your experiences, you could give them something to work with as the head janitor or something."

Head janitor. She says it like it's some sort of honor. Four years in college, doing my best to be seen as valuable, and I get to be the head janitor. Isn't that what dreams are made of? I continue to look at the words in the file, the stroke of each letter staring back at me in an almost mocking manner as if to say how dare you be so ambitious?

Eventually, I lift my head, hiding my humiliation behind a smile. "Thank you for

considering me for the position. I'll give it a thought and get back to you."

She returns my smile, getting on her feet. "We'll be looking forward to working with you, Aurora. I'm certain you'll do a great job for the pack."

I nod, mirroring her movements. My eyes burn with humiliation, but I maintain a neutral expression, making my way out of the conference room. Her words feel like a dressed-up insult—like she is trying to show me where I belong.

"How did it go?" Jenny asks the moment I walk into the reception area, her smile as fake as the red bottoms on my feet.

I flash her my brightest smile, and when her brows crinkle in surprise, I revel in my little victory. I might've been treated like a sub-member of the pack, but I refuse to tuck my tail and act like one. If she's looking to entertain herself with someone's misery, she might just look in the mirror. I knew the pack valued pure-blood shifters over all else. I just didn't expect them to make critical decisions based on the same outdated values. The company belongs to the Blackwood Pack, and while we have secured our grounds in world politics, we are yet to make our mark in the finance department. I recall Lucien mentioning how breaking into the finance sector would be a top priority once he's alpha. That and my love for numbers contributed to me sticking with finance in college, and now I can't even get a chance to show how much I can do. I'm not trying to be smug, but I can say no one in Blackwood has a CV as impressive as mine. Back in college, when I mostly worked with humans, I was considered an asset to every firm I worked with. They were all reluctant to let me go, so I knew that this was not about my inability to perform. It was about the human in my DNA. My ride home is mostly quiet. I don't even turn on the music. I keep wondering what life would've looked like if I were pure-blood. Maybe I'll be treated with a little more respect when I send applications and have a voice that actually matters.

My father was pure-blood, but his fated mate, my mother, was human. He always told me stories of how he was constantly discouraged from getting married to her and how he was warned against tainting his bloodline. But he paid them no heed and went ahead to marry the love of his life.

They had the most beautiful, though short, love story. But that left them with me, the taint, and now I was being treated like one. Something told me if he was still alive, things wouldn't be so bad.

By the time I pull into my parents' little cottage, I am exhausted, and all I want is to curl into my bed with a tub of ice cream and let out my heart. Maybe I'll visit my parents' grave to talk.

I unlock the door to find Lucien lounging on the sofa, a bouquet of white lilies in hand. "Congratulations." The statement sounds more like a question than a celebratory word, his eyes slowly searching mine for answers.

The excitement bubbling through my wolf at the sight of our mate is a sharp contrast to the fresh wave of sadness flowing through me. I'm relieved to see him and to know I have someone to share my feelings with, but I also wish I returned with better news. He has been away for almost three weeks, and I wanted to welcome him with the good news.

My shoulders drop, and I avert my gaze, not wanting to see the disappointment in his eyes when he realizes he got flowers for nothing. "Come here." Lucien drops the flowers on the table and pulls me into a hug. That's when I let out the first sob. This job is supposed to be my trump card, my way of contributing to the pack and showing my support for Lucien. Now, I have no way to do that.

"They said I wasn't good enough."

He stiffens briefly, pulling away from our hug to look at my face. "Who said that?"

His voice is sharp, and his eyes narrow. I have no doubt if I give him a name, he will seek them out. I let out a dry chuckle. "She didn't exactly say so, but she did offer me the role of a janitor. Apparently, despite my qualifications, I need to be pure-blood to be considered."

His expression softens, and he pulls me into a tighter hug, placing a long kiss on my head. "You're more than enough, and one day, when you're Luna, they won't be able to deny how amazing you are."

When you're Luna. It's all he ever says. There have been times I've expected him to do something about the situation, but he says his training is very critical and delicate, and he can't risk offsetting the balance until he has been named alpha. I'm not needy and inconsiderate, but sometimes I wish things were different and he could openly fight for me.

"How long till they get to see it?" I ask, my voice muffled by his chest. Lucien and I found out we were fated three years ago during the annual pack ceremony, shortly after the conspiracy of the white witches was exposed.

With no need for a public confirmation, we decided to keep it private and give him some time to settle into his role while I focused on my academics. Once we're ready, we'll make a public declaration. It wasn't a bad idea at the time, but now, I find myself wanting more than stolen glances and sneaky link-ups.

"As soon as my training is over, I'll take you to my father. Once we receive his blessings, you'll be publicly mine." His voice grows softer. "We've already come so far. I just need a little time, okay?"

I nod, burying myself deeper into his embrace. Time. It's only a matter of time, and if

I've waited three years, what difference does an extra year make? Our hug slowly goes from comforting to sensual, with his hands running all over my body. From my back to my ass, where he sinks his fingers and squeezes tightly till I let out a yelp. He seizes the moment to capture my lips in a kiss, pushing his tongue into my mouth in one quick swoop.

Tingles spread through me as his tongue tangles with mine in an intense dance of passion, his taste intoxicating my senses. I stand on my tippy toes, pulling him down by the neck to get more of him, and he matches my urgency with equal fervor. His deft fingers quickly undo the buttons of my shirt, and my bra follows shortly after, the cool afternoon breeze brushing past my hardened nipples and sending a delicious shiver through me. Lucien dips his head, taking one nipple in his mouth while his hand toys with the other, kneading the mound of flesh like dough and pulling at the taut bud.

Heat shoots through my spine, arcing my back and pushing my boobs further into his face. He let out a soft chuckle, biting down on my nipple and immediately replacing his teeth with the soft stroke of his tongue. The alternation between pain and pleasure pulls a loud moan from me, and my hands tighten around his neck, tugging at the trail of hair on his nape. Lucien lets out a groan before hoisting me up, and I instinctively wrap my legs around him. He carries me to the bedroom and dumps me on the bed without breaking his lips from mine. His hands immediately go to the button of my pants while I fumble with his shirt, eager to rip the piece of clothing separating his body from mine. We're a tangled mess of limbs grabbing at each other and struggling to do away with the barriers separating us. "Lift your hips, baby," he whispers, and I balance my weight on my elbows, watching as he rips off my trousers and pants in one go, carelessly discarding them on the floor. His shirt follows, and I take the little window of time before he covers my body to marvel at his body, from the perfect width of his shoulders down to the veins snaking around his arms and his chiseled abs tapering to form a deep "v" disappearing into his trousers with a light trail of hair.

If not for the weight of his body pressing against mine and his fingers distracting me with soft circles on my clit, I would love to chase those hairs to the point where they stop to reveal the hard length that is currently digging into my thighs."So wet," Lucien growls, rubbing his fingers around my pussy and spreading my juices all over. "I've missed how hungry your pussy gets for me, practically weeping for me to shove my cock inside you and fuck you into oblivion."

His words cause my walls to clench, and Lucien chuckles, dipping his head to my neck and nibbling at my ears. "You'd like that, wouldn't you? You'd like my cock driving into you and wrecking this pretty pussy of yours till the only sound you can produce is my name."

"Please...." the only intelligible sound that forms through the gibberish spilling from my mouth. I have no idea what I am begging for, but when he slips two fingers in me and curls them upwards, I know without a doubt that I want him to fill me up.

He let out a strangled groan, watching his fingers move in and out of my pussy before latching his mouth onto my clit, causing my hips to buck at the intense feeling. My eyes roll to the back of my head and my entire body shakes with need. I feel like I am levitating into a cloud of endless pleasure, and when that low pressure starts to build in the pit of my stomach, I know I'm going to topple over the edge. ?

As if he can sense how close I am, Lucien increases the pace of his fingers, his lips sucking harder on my clit. Tiny dots of light form behind my eyes with the growing intensity in my stomach, and before I know it, I am hit with an intense wave of orgasm, tearing a sharp scream from my throat. Through the fog of my pleasure, I can barely register Lucien covering my lips with his, swallowing my cries of pleasure. My body feels like it is floating in space, a boneless mass of pleasure shaking from the intensity of the feeling coursing through it. The orgasms I gave myself during his time away did not come close.

He does not give me time to recover before shoving his dick into me, burying himself deep to the hilt in one quick thrust. "Oh god!" I scream through the blinding wave of pleasure spreading through me like a burning fire. "Lucien, baby. Scream my name, not gods," he grits out while continuously slamming himself into me. Every move delivers a fresh jolt of pleasure, each greater than the previous, till I feel the next wave of orgasm building inside me with even more intensity than the first. In no time, the second wave of orgasm hits me, ripping another scream from me. "Lucien!" I scream as the waves run through me, my body dangerously close to blacking out from the intensity of it. Lucien lets out a deep growl, one so raw I could feel his wolf close to the surface before I feel the warm spouts of cum coating my inside. We ride the wave together before falling into an exhausted, breathless pile.

"I love you," he whispers, pressing a kiss into my hair. I'm exhausted from my high, but I muster my strength to say, "I love you too," while relishing the softness of his lips pressing into different parts of my body.

A ring noise blasts into the space, cutting through our sex haze. "Are you expecting anyone?" Lucien asks, tearing himself off me like I was on fire and snatching his clothes from the floor.

I mask the stabbing feeling in my chest with a cough. "No, are you?" He casts me a funny look. "No one knows I'm here," he says, doing up the last button of his shirt.

I know he doesn't mean for his words to hurt, and he was merely stating a fact of the nature of our relationship. No one can know about us till he is ready. But that does nothing to soothe my wolf's pain. Lucien looks at me, a solemn expression crossing his eyes. My face must betray my feelings. "I'm sorry, baby. I didn't mean it like that. I just—" The doorbell blasts again, this time longer and more urgent. I hop off the bed, snatching a dress from my wardrobe, and head for the door while Lucien follows with a little distance. I open the door to find Liam, Lucien's childhood friend and second in command, standing with worry etched on his face.

"Sorry to bother you, Rora. Have you seen Luc?" "Is there a problem?" Lucien appears beside me. I steal a quick glance at him to find him effortlessly put together, every evidence of our lovemaking neatly tucked behind his steel eyes, perfect hair, and pressed shirt. I am instantly self-conscious in my home dress and probably scattered hair. "Yes, and your father has summoned us," Liam replies, and my gaze snaps to him. "Is everything alright?" "Nothing for you to worry about." Liam smiles, but it barely touches his eyes. I look back at Lucien, who is already out the door and slipping on his shoes. Something different is amiss. "Thanks for having me, Rora. I'll see if I can put in a word for you to the HR." Lucien says, his eyes not meeting mine and his voice dripping with sterile civility as he beckons on Liam to follow him.

I want to press further, but I know I won't get an answer. So I stand and watch as Liam's Mercedes pulls out of my driveway, my heart sinking to my stomach with every bit of distance put between us and a feeling I can't name eating away at my senses.

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Lucien

"How many casualties do we have?" I ask Liam as we step out of Aurora's house. "No deaths have been recorded, but we have a few wounded soldiers and destroyed facilities." My fingers curl into a fist, and I have the sudden urge to hit something. Fucking Silver Pack. They've been acting funny for a while, wanting to gain control over the headquarters and access to pack politics, maintaining the balance between human and wolf shifters. The territory has been under the control of Blackwood for decades. Every once in a while, Silver Pack decides to make a fuss out of nothing, but this was the first time they were making physical contact and causing real damage. This spelled war in every shifter tongue. War before I am named Alpha. Could life get any more entertaining?

"And my father, is he aware of this?" "Yes, he has called for a meeting to discuss the best way to tackle the situation," Liam answers, unlocking his car and slipping into the driver's seat.

I get into the passenger side, letting out a long string of curses. Getting grilled for not anticipating an attack or warding it off is the last thing I need from my father, and with him getting a hang of the situation before me, that is exactly what I was headed for.

"Don't beat yourself up over it, man," Liam says as he pulls out of Aurora's driveway. "You couldn't have seen this coming or countered it. Personally, I was in a bar when I got the call." I let out a snort. "I'm happy to hear of your liberties and freedom to do as you please." Liam has always had an easy life. Despite his father being my father's second in command and being raised to fit into the role of my second in command, he

was never pressured by the burden. He was allowed to live life on his terms and do as he wished, provided he did not bring disgrace to his family.

I, on the other hand, was to live my life according to the will of the pack. I am expected to think about how my decisions will impact the pack and to think of the future of the pack before making the slightest decision. As my father would always say, "Contrary to popular belief, being alpha is not just about power. As the alpha, you exist in service to the pack, and you are a representation of your community. Every part of you must reflect that. You are for the pack before you are for yourself."

The words repeat in my head like a broken record day and night, reminding me that I cannot afford to make mistakes or indulge in some of the pleasures my mates do. A simple mistake from me can endanger the lives of my community, and right now, I am about to get an earful of how I should be everywhere at every time. Sometimes, I find myself wishing I had a different life.

"That's beside the point, Luc. This was out of your control, and despite your training and activities in the pack, your father is still alpha, and he will always get intel before anyone else. This one isn't on you."

Liam's words are supposed to relieve me of the pressing guilt on my shoulders, but I only end up falling deeper. When we arrive at the pack house, I am halfway out of the car before Liam parks, racing up the stairs to get a word in and maybe explain the reason behind my incompetence—as he likes to call my slip-ups—before the meeting commences.

I walk into an ongoing meeting with Liam's father and some other important pack members. My father's eyes twitch with disappointment, but he says nothing as I take a seat. Liam enters shortly.

"It's nice of you to finally join us. I believe you've been briefed on the situation at

hand? My father says, his eyes moving between Liam and me.

"Yes, Alpha," We both answer. I was instructed at a very young age to learn to maintain professionalism and to never refer to him as Father in public settings.

"What do you suggest as the next line of action, then?"

The question is directed at me, and all eyes rest on me, heavy with expectations. I cleared my throat, ready to give an alpha-worthy answer. "I think we should seek help from the king before resorting to physical combat. I prefer to exhaust every diplomatic approach before putting the lives of the pack members in danger of a full-blown war."

"And if your plea for a diplomatic approach is met with resistance and Kaden keeps encroaching on our boundaries, will you put the lives of the pack members in danger of a full-blown war?" My father fires the next question, a look of challenge glowing in his eyes. My first question was satisfactory, and everyone agreed with it, but he wouldn't be Alpha William if he did not grill me to the point of death in front of everyone. More so, the question was a tricky one, and his choice of words made it even more difficult to answer.

After some thought, I came up with an answer. "Sometimes war is necessary to maintain peace, and choosing not to go head-first into war is not a sign of weakness but a sign of regard for the lives that have been entrusted to you. Blackwood is not weak by any standard, and if Alpha Kaden refuses to act right, we'll have to show him why we've been the leading pack for centuries. But I'd try a diplomatic approach first."

My reply is met with nods and grunts of approval, and a visit to the palace is scheduled for the next day. The meeting is dismissed, leaving me and my father in his office. "Where were you at the time of the attack?" he asks, lighting a cigar. At fifty-

eight, you'd expect the old man to quit most bad habits and embrace a healthy way of living, but he was as stubborn as a donkey, and I had already given up convincing him to do away with smoking.

"Training with Liam." I was expecting this, but I found myself searching for words.

"Hmm." he places his lighter on the table, puffing out a cloud of smoke. "What did I tell you about being a step ahead at all times?" His words are followed by coughing fits lasting longer than usual. My eyes fill with concern, but I quickly tuck the look away. With my father, sympathy is often perceived as an insult.

I wait for his fits to subside before responding.

"I'm sorry about that. It won't happen again." More than incompetence, my father has a burning hatred for excuses, and I have learned never to give one, no matter how justified they may be. To him, they cannot change the outcome of the situation and are useless.

"Say that to the victims of an attack that would've been avoided if you did your job. One more sign of recklessness, and I'll have no other choice but to send you back to the training camp. You're dismissed."

His words hit me like a punch in the gut, but I show no sign of hurt. God forbid I show that I possess emotions. "Thank you, Father," I say instead and head for the door.

"Luc," he calls on my way out. "You'll be accompanying me to the palace in place of my beta. Do not embarrass me." "Yes, Father," I reply, stepping out of the room and drawing in a lungful of air. "How did it go?" Liam's voice comes from out of nowhere, almost startling me.

"He wants me to accompany him to the palace."

"Just the both of you?"

"Yup." I add an extra pop to the 'p', pushing myself off the wall and heading to the dining room with Liam falling into step with me.

"Tough business. What are you going to do?"

"Drown myself in every article I can find about pack conflicts and negotiation strategies before dawn." I pluck an apple from the table, biting into the fleshy red fruit.

The visit to the palace will be my first official one-on-one outing with my father, and my nerves are currently firing at an alarming rate. His threat to send me back to training echoed in the back of my head, but I didn't let it show. Tomorrow, I'll show him how good an alpha I can be.

We arrive at the palace to find the alpha of Silver Pack, Alpha Kaden, already seated and waiting in the throne room. Apparently, upon receiving our complaint, Queen Alice summoned him for the meeting so she could hear from both sides. This might be the first time I'll be meeting her, but I've heard a lot about her and the changes she's been making in the community. She was discovered to be the lost princess three years ago, and since then, she's been a blessing to most. Shortly, we're joined by the queen. "Good morning, everyone. We're gathered here to mediate the dispute between Blackwood Pack and Silver Pack. Her gaze sweeps the room, pausing when they get to my father.

"This complaint was laid by the alpha of Blackwood, so I will let him go first," she

says, indicating for my father to step forward. "Thank you for your audience, my Queen," he says, bowing. "As we all know, the headquarters is located in the Creek Territory, which happens to be under Blackwood and has been so for centuries."

"Lies," Alpha Kaden cuts in. "The Creek Territory first belonged to Silver Pack."

"That's enough, Alpha Kaden," the queen chastises. "I understand you have a lot to say, Alpha Kaden, but I would love for you to wait your turn."

A brief silence follows before my father continues, leading us through the history of Creek Territory and how Blackwood has been in charge of the headquarters, meticulously maintaining the balance between the human and wolf-shifter world while controlling the affairs in our favor. Many in the royal court nod in agreement, while some choose to stick with Alpha Kaden. When he is finally given the chance to speak, he dates the story to a time when not even the history books could account for, insisting that the Creek Territory was both founded and run by Silver Pack before they were intimidated by Blackwood and their numbers. His motive for a takeover is as glaring as the sun, but since no one could completely counter him and the dispute has been going on for centuries, the queen decides to suggest a common ground.

"This is a very delicate matter, and I understand that both have claims to the territory. But the issues pertaining to territories and their ownership is a dispute the King and I have been working on, and if you can call a truce and be patient, a new bill will be passed as soon as possible, and all territories will know where they fall."

The queen's decree might as well mean that the territory belongs to Blackwood. Territories were shared following the natural divisions of the land, and Creek was on the same side as Blackwood, while Silver Pack was on the other side of the river. Alpha Kaden must've come to the same realization as he put up his hand. "Your Majesty, I appreciate you making time to indulge our petty pack squabbles and your desire to help, but as we all know, we wolves are territorial beings." His gaze sweeps

across the room, and noting the nods of approval, he continues. "While we appreciate the desire to pass a bill to maintain the peace, I and my pack prefer to stick to the old ways and be given an opportunity to fight for what is ours. Besides, a weak pack has no business controlling a territory." Scattered murmurs of clashing interest spread across the throne room as pack and court members disagree. I see the moment as my opening.

"Your Majesty, my elders," I address the court, getting on my feet. "Like Alpha Kaden said, we wolf shifters are territorial beings and would typically fight for what is ours, but we are shifters, not mindless beasts. We have a human part that enables us to think, unlike mere wolves. I don't know about the Silver Pack, but I prioritize the lives of all my pack members and would not subject them to the losses of a war if it is not necessary. I suggest we save ourselves from the bloodshed and follow protocol. I believe we have long evolved from blood lust." My remark is met with silence, and I can see the queen looking at me with approval. Some of the court members who were previously agitated reign in their claws, taking in the meaning of my words. "The young man has spoken wisely. I suggest we wait for the bill," an elder from the court says, but Alpha Kaden declines.

"If Blackwood is too scared to fight, then that is the indication that they're too weak to have control over the territory. Prolonging the issue and waiting for a bill that might never be passed is not ideal. My pack and I have decided to fight to the death for what is ours, and the current law permits us to. Blackwood is welcome to surrender if they don't want to fight."

Tension returns to the room following Alpha Kaden's not-so-subtle insinuation, and I freeze. This is certainly not how I expected this to turn out. There has been no war in Blackwood for the longest time, and we have done everything to maintain peace. Even my training spoke at length about choosing to preserve the lives of pack members over ego-serving, mindless wars. This was the worst timing, but I know it takes two to clear a war, so I'll bank on my father refusing to indulge the maniac. "I'm

afraid I'll have to agree with Alpha Kaden on this one," my father says, his eyes blazing with silent fury. My eyes snap to him in surprise. I quickly mask my feelings with a nod of agreement, not wanting to appear scared and weak in front of the court. "Passing the law might take years, and we don't have the time for that. We'll settle this the way we know best. Blackwood will fight." The not-so-subtle war declaration sends a wave of silence across the room as everyone takes their time to digest the words and their implications. My mind is a jumbled mess, scrambling to adjust to the new reality, figure out the best approach to the situation, and be steps ahead.

The meeting ended on a tense note, with the queen promising to find a way to prevent the war, but we all knew that might come after an ample amount of bloodshed. Changing a law in the shifter community was not an easy feat by any measure. The drive back home was even more tense and uncomfortable. "This fight is your one and only way to prove how capable you are, so I'll leave it to you," My father says as soon as we step into his office. I have no time to process the meaning of his words before he confirms my suspicion. "You'll have to be named alpha as soon as possible." This is the moment I have spent my whole life preparing for, but the feeling of freedom and euphoria I expected to feel following the declaration was masked by the bloodied taste of the looming war. Not my wolf, though. He was pleasantly pleased with the promotion.

I expected to play a vital role in the coming war. What I didn't anticipate was heading it. A fit of dry cough cuts through my thoughts, and I focus on my father's hunched shoulders as he coughs into a white handkerchief. He squeezes the piece of fabric and speedily tucks it into his pocket, but I catch the characteristic red stain of blood on it. His sickness is getting worse, and I know it's one of the reasons he is handing over to me. But the goddess will most likely turn mortal before he admits to any sign of weakness. It's probably why he won't quit smoking despite his worsening condition, to prove he is not scared.

He lifts his head, and the words he utters have me wishing his fits lasted long enough

for him to wave me out as usual. "You'll announce your engagement to Selene Westwood before your coronation." "What?" I'm completely blown away by his words. Marry Selene? Granted, we were in a relationship during my first year of college, but that ended a long time ago, and I've not even caught a glimpse of her since then. "I believe I did not stutter. You will marry Selene Westwood and be named alpha afterward." His tone is flat, and he is passive, as though he didn't just take over the reins of my future. I have sacrificed my whole life for the pack. The least he can do is let me spend what was left of it with a woman of my choosing. I summon every courage in my veins.

"Selene is not my fated mate." "Your mother wasn't mine either, but here we are." I opened my mouth to counter his point, but he continued. "The pack is at risk, and Selene comes from a long line of pure-blood warriors, one that takes their bloodline seriously. With her as your mate, you're bound to her in the oldest and most highly recognized way known—by blood—and they'll recognize you as one of them. Her brother being your second in command is an added bonus. You'll create an alliance that will have every pure-blood warrior in the community loyal and willing to fight for you. It is the best line of action, and it is final."

"What if I already found my fated mate and intend to marry her?"

He lets out a loud scoff, lighting himself a fresh roll of cigar. "The orphan half-blood that stays in the cottage close to the boundary? I only allowed you the liberty because I knew you had blood flowing in your loins and would want somewhere to experiment. You couldn't have thought she was Luna material."

"I am the one she is fated to, and she seems just fine to me. She's smart, empathetic, and has a lot to offer the pack." Anger blurs my vision, cursing through my blood like hot poison. My wolf scratches at my inside, pacing restlessly and fighting to be let out, but I fight back, holding him in, not willing to escalate things. He might be my father and the alpha, but disrespect to my mate is a direct insult. "Years spent teaching

to be what you need to be, and you stand in front of me to spew this foolishness? Tie whatever loose ends you need to tie and propose to Selene. That or you'll lose your position as the next alpha."

His words carry a tone of finality. I toy with the idea of presenting him with an alternative, but what good will that be? As much as I think Aurora will make a perfectly fine Luna, he is right about one thing. With the current situation, the pack needs someone who is more than just fine and won't require extra training to get into their role. Against my better judgment and my wolf's protests, I find myself slowly seeing the sense in my father's words. It has always been logic and practicality over heart for him, and years of training have shaped me into a less emotional being. He pulls out a stack of files and plugs in his noise-cancellation earpiece, indicating the end of our conversation. My wolf still wants to put up a fight. He does not hide his displeasure and disagreement about how I handled the situation, but I know better and understand the way things work. This isn't a fight we can win, so I leave his office with a cloud of defeat and distress hanging over me. How was I supposed to break this to Aurora? Just the other day, I promised to make her my Luna, and now I have to tell her I'm to marry another. Liam is waiting in my room by the time I get there, watching me like a hawk.

"I'll take it that you've heard," I say, reaching for the bottle of scotch on my table and pouring a generous serving. "Marrying Selene can't be that bad. You both were once in love. I'm certain you'll find a way to make this work."

I struggle to decide if he's saying this to make me feel better or speaking for his sister. "We were in a relationship four years ago, one that didn't last the past six months. You can hardly call that love." "That's fair." He picks a glass from the rack and pours himself a drink. "But I recall you talking about your ideal woman and saying Selene is the perfect model of your dream Luna. Surely that counts." "My ideal woman. I recall saying those words during one of the nights I went out drinking with boys back at the camp. They were trying to hook me up with some bartender, and I said she

wasn't my type. The reply prompted them to ask about my ideal woman, and I filled them in based on what I thought a future Luna should be. One of the boys mentioned Selene as an example, and I agreed she would make a perfect Luna, but she wasn't my Aurora.

An image of her soft heart-shaped face and brown curls fills my head, and I can't help the painful tug in my chest. She wasn't meant to lead. She was nothing like the woman I was meant to be with, and I doubt if she knew anything about pack politics or could possibly have anything to add to me, but she was the one the goddess picked out for me. "Is this about Aurora?" Liam's voice breaks into my thoughts, and I immediately raise my guard.

"What about her?"

"I know you've always been kind to her because of her situation, but I can't pretend not to have noticed that you've grown closer in the past years. Is she your fated mate?" The questions caught me off guard, and a strong "no" tumbled out of my mouth before I could stop it. A bitter cocktail of guilt and frustration burns down my throat, and I swallow a generous gulp of scotch to replace the unpleasant burn. My decision to keep the bond between Aurora and me quiet till I became alpha might have been under the guise of wanting to be done with training, but as I thought about everything, I guess a part of me always knew my father wouldn't approve of her. I wanted to wait until I was alpha and out of my father's control to bring her in.

If that is the case, didn't it mean she wasn't suitable to be Luna? A strong wave of displeasure flashes through me that is so intense I am instantly nauseous from its effect. The message was clear. My wolf isn't pleased with the current conversation and is doing all he can to stand his ground.

I grit my teeth, enlisting every bit of strength in me to hold him back. The last thing I need is him coming to the surface and giving Liam the confirmation he needs.

I tried to view Aurora from a perspective where my feelings for her were nonexistent to see if I'd find her worthy. But I was having a hard time conjuring the image. I didn't like the answer that stared back at me. I raised my eyes to find Liam still watching me with hawk eyes.

"If you squint harder, I'm sure you'll be able to catch a glimpse of my soul."

"I have no desire to find out what goes on in there, but I'll leave you with a few words that should guide your decision-making." He assumes his all-knowing posture, crossing one leg over the other and leaning into the sofa. "Selene was raised close to the very heart of the pack business. Her education and preferred hobbies were tailored to make her the perfect asset. She took extra courses on negotiations and mediation, including an extended study on leadership and people management. She was raised to rule. Aurora, on the other hand, sweet as she might be—" "I told you. I have no business with her." I snap, my chest heaving with frustration. I can't have him knowing Aurora is my fated mate, not now that I am expected to mate with his sister. That'll only complicate things for me. More than ever, I need my relationship with her to stay secret. I cannot afford any level of messiness. "You said it yourself. I've only been kind to her because of her position in the pack. She's a charity case the pack adopted to keep from going rogue. Why would you think a person like that would be fated to me?" As soon as the words spilled from my lips, a loud crashing noise came from my door. I pause, making eye contact with Liam, who was watching the door with a raised brow. I rush and throw it open and am met with an empty hallway and the sweet smell of honey and peach lingering in the air. Aurora. I stand for a while, waiting to see if someone will make an appearance, but nothing happens. Eventually, I convince myself the noise is probably from the construction going on outside the pack house, and the current situation is probably causing my wolf to conjure reminders of her to sway my decision. Besides, she is not a big fan of the pack house. That's why most of our meet-ups happen at her house. Just as I am about to shut the door, a little picnic basket by the corner catches my eye. The woven basket proves to be heavier than it appears, and curiosity gets the best of me. I throw off the

lid to find a delectable spread of my favorites. A chill that has nothing to do with the weather spreads through me. I look down the hallway and back at the picnic basket. Its contents are enough evidence to erase any doubt I have about Aurora coming around. She was here, and she must've heard a thing or two."Everything alright?" Liam calls from inside, and I immediately snap the basket shut, pushing it further down the hall."Yeah. Probably the construction workers making a lot of noise," I reply, trying to keep the sinking feeling in my chest out of my voice. I should go after her before it's too late. But how do I explain it all after claiming she means nothing to me?It takes every bit of strength to drag myself back into the room with my wolf thrashing and seeking dominance. The veins in my neck might be damn well close to popping with how hard I was fighting him back. His strength is something I appreciate in combat and other scenarios, but now that he is exerting it on me, I am not so appreciative.I take a quick glance at the clock and make a mental note to go see her once it's dusk. Hopefully, she didn't hear too much.

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Aurora

There are millions of ways to break a heart. Some are dealt by the cold hands of nature. Some are by gods and forces beyond our control, destiny, as some may call it. But the worst of all are the ones dealt to us by the people who are supposed to keep our hearts safe. The ones we voluntarily handed the very core of being to, trusting that they'll take care of them. The pain cuts deeper than any blade, slashing through parts of you you never knew existed, and most of this pain is credited to the fact that we unwittingly contributed to this suffering. We opened ourselves to them, and now all that is left is pain, emptiness, a truckload of questions, and bruised self-worth. She's a charity case my father adopted to keep from going rogue. Why would you think a person like that would be fated to me?"

The words reverberate in my head like a broken record, each turn cutting deeper than the previous as I willed my legs to go faster. I chewed on my lower lips, desperately trying to hold in the trembles till I got home. I will not fall apart in the pack house. I will not crack open for all to catch a glimpse of what is inside me.

With every long stride I take away from Lucien's room, the burning in my chest intensifies. A part of me wants to march back into his room and demand for him to repeat the words to my face, while the more vulnerable part of me wants to ask if he meant them. I had come to check on him and find out if he was back from the palace. I know the meeting with the queen was his first royal outing, and I also know how overbearing the current alpha can be. I wanted to make sure he was okay. I even made a basket of his favorite food and pastries using his mother's old recipe book that I borrowed the last time I visited to make everything as comforting as it could be, and I arrived at the door to meet the proverbial slap in the face. At first, I was in denial and

tried to convince myself that Liam's distinctive voice was talking about his sister and someone who happens to share Lucien's name. It had to be. I would've known if Selene and Lucien were exes. Lucien wouldn't keep a thing like that from me. But Lucien spoke, and every bit of me came to a screeching halt. My heart slowed, my pulse came slow and hard, and my breath was reduced to shallow puffs, my vision blurring with the reactions unfolding inside me. Sweat covered my palms, and the picnic basket I forgot I was holding slid out, crashing on the floor with a loud thud and jolting me back to the present. Not willing to be found lurking around and eavesdropping, I panicked and took to my heels without a second thought.

I make a quick turn at the end of the corridor, choosing to exit through the old garage instead of the kitchen and front entrance. The fewer people that see me, the better. Just as I round the corner, I slam into a solid wall of muscle and lose my footing. I shut my eyes, mentally bracing myself for the crash that never came. I crack my eyes open to find myself suspended mid-air and the cold, hard grey eyes of Alpha William peering deep into my soul.

"You should be more careful," he says, pulling me to my feet. I can't say if he is scolding me or showing concern, so I settle for a nod while I fight to get my heart to slow down. He wasn't using his alpha dominance on me, but I still feel heavily intimidated by him. Alpha William is easily the scariest man I know. At the age of fifty-eight, he stood tall with a head full of grey hair covering every part of his scalp, down to the upper part of his nape, and extending to form a full thick beard. He looked like a white lion with every bit of regal confidence.

"Are you okay?" He raises a brow at me. "You look a bit flushed, and your eyes are quite red. Have you been crying?" I don't know what to make of his sudden interest and concern. He never checked on me after the pack adopted me to keep me from going rogue after my parent's death. The sudden interest is alien to me, and given the current situation, it is hardly ideal.

"I'm fine, Alpha. It's just allergies." He regards me for a second, not masking his disbelief. "In that case, you're just the person I have been searching for."

My brows knit together in confusion. Why is he searching for me? A strange feeling gnaws at my gut, urging me to make up an excuse and leave his presence, but I seem to be glued to the floor beneath me. "You're struggling with allergies too?" I blurt out, not knowing what to say. He turns in the direction of the central exit, "Walk with me." My feet begin to move before the rest of me catches on. "I won't call it an allergy, and I'm not the patient, but someone dear to me happens to have been afflicted by something close to that." He rounds the corner, stepping into the open dining area, and immediately channels every pair of eyeballs in our direction. The combination of him and me must surely stick out like a sore thumb. "Almost the same as getting your water contaminated, but due to the contamination, you cannot tell you're taking contaminated water, but that doesn't make the water less contaminated." I have no idea what to say or if I am required to say anything, so I follow him closely, wondering what any of this has to do with me. "Mind you. This contamination is such that it spreads through the blood, infects the DNA, and greatly reduces its viability." He stops abruptly. "So, tell me, if someone dear to you is in danger of ruining their future, would you save them?" I don't think before saying "Yes." It's the obvious answer. I would never stand and watch someone I care for suffer.

"So, you'll do whatever it takes to free them from said contamination?"

I open my mouth to say yes when an unmistakable glint passing through his eyes stops me. "I don't understand what you're asking me, Alpha," I say instead, unease washing over me like a shower of cold water. "You're a clever girl, Aurora. I've watched you grow, and I've gotten multiple reports on your performance, and with the way you looked like you were falling apart a few minutes ago, I gathered it shouldn't be hard for you to put two and two together." For the first time, I didn't drop my gaze when his eyes met mine. I held them, the meaning behind his words spelled out in clear English for me. Lucien is the loved one. I am the contamination. He

doesn't let me recover from the shock of his first admission before continuing."I know you two have shared a very close friendship, but if you care about him as much as I think, you'll understand his path is very different from yours. He needs certain..." he waves his hand around like he is trying to find the right word to use "qualities, ones that cannot be taught, only acquired from birth. Do you understand?"

I stand frozen. My throat is suddenly too tight to produce a sound, and my tongue slacks in my mouth. My skin prickles with awareness, and goosebumps left by the chill spreads through me. I can't speak. I can't move. I only stare. Do I understand?When I don't say anything, he continues. "I understand that you've wasted a few good years on him, so I'll compensate you for them." His voice takes a less friendly tone. "I'll write a fat check, and you can leave the pack for a while without being considered a rogue. Travel anywhere you want. Clear your head. After a few years, you can decide to come back or continue having the time of your life."

"You're paying me off Lucien's life?" Every time I think the man has rendered me speechless, he opens his mouth, and somehow, he cuts me deeper. Travel anywhere you want. Clear your head. That has to be the most articulated 'disappear from my son's life, and I'll pay you in exchange' in the history of the universe. It was a clear warning, but he managed to make it look like a suggestion and like I had a choice.

He let out a low chuckle. "When you put it like that, it has a bad ring to it. Consider this a favor from an alpha who cares about your wasted years. Think about it, and I'll have the check delivered to you at dusk."Without another word, he turns to take his leave, but I find my voice before he gets far. "I don't need your money," I say, surprising myself. "You can bring all the money in the world, and I won't touch it with a pitchfork. I don't put a price on the people I care about. But thanks for looking out for me."He looks momentarily stunned by my outburst, but he doesn't say a word. He turns and continues down the hallway.I suck in a shaky breath, scanning the hallway to make sure no one witnessed my shame before taking to my heels and practically racing the entire way home.I don't know how long I spent wrapped in my

sheets, but by the time my doorbell rang, it was seven p.m., the regular meeting time for Lucien and me. I drag myself out of bed, feeling the weight of my bleeding heart weighing heavily on my bones.

I haven't done anything since I left the pack house. I couldn't cry. I couldn't scream. I had tucked myself in, buried under the weight of my blanket, and replayed the events of the day, dissecting them into a million pieces, trying to find a different twist to them and failing. I tried to convince myself that it wasn't over, not when I'd not heard from Lucien. But a part of me knew the outcome wouldn't be any different from what I already knew in my heart.

Regardless, there was another part of me that hoped. A little part that held on to the bond I shared with Lucien and refused to let go. Surely, if the Moon Goddess paired us, there has to be a way for us to work things out. It sounds stupid in light of recent events, but I can't help it. Everything hurts so bad. A gut-wrenching combination of my pain and that of my wolf leaves me hanging by a thread. I desperately need this to be some bad dream. Lucien is standing on the other side of the door when I look through the peephole. He looks just like he always does, calm with his hair effortlessly styled to perfection and nothing like the train wreck I currently share a resemblance with. He probably has no idea that I overheard his conversation with him and Liam.

"Hey, baby," he smiles as soon as I unbolt the door, placing a quick kiss on my forehead. I am both comforted and pissed at the action. Is he really going to walk in here and pretend his conversation with Liam never happened? At the same time, I find myself hoping the kiss means I misheard something or the whole thing was just one big prank. It is the less hurtful narrative, but I am not stupid, and I don't exactly see Alpha William having the time for a prank. "Did you come by the pack house today?" He follows closely behind me. "I can swear I saw someone like you, but I wasn't so sure." I can sense his effort to make his tone light and playful, but his eyes betray him. They were almost the same color as his father's but lacked the

characteristic chill and darkness.

"I came around," I answer, not giving anything away. I have so many questions, but I hold back. I need to know what he thinks before saying anything.

He stills, his eyes searching mine for a hint of something. "Did you leave a picnic basket in front of my door?" "Yes." I move to the kitchen to pour myself a glass of water, needing something to distract me from the choking tension in the room.

"Oh. Why didn't you come in?" "I didn't want to interrupt your conversation. You were pretty passionate about the topic," I bite out, feeling my patience slip. Anger is slowly replacing the hurt I was feeling. "Oh...About that," he trails off, his eyes not meeting mine. "I was hoping to have had the time to enlighten you on the situation myself. It wasn't my intention for you to find out in that manner." A ringing noise explodes somewhere in my head, and I whip my head in his direction with so much speed that I am instantly nauseous. He stands in front of me, the picture of complete calm and serenity, speaking to me like he was casually addressing the pack. "I overheard you engaged in a conversation about your marriage, and this is all you have to say?" I am livid with anger. It's all I can do to keep myself from shaking him and demanding answers. I definitely won't be able to shake his 6' 4" frame of muscle, but it would give me somewhere to channel my emotions. He regards me quietly before sitting on the sofa and patting the spot next to him. "How about you take a seat? Calm down a little, and we can talk about this. I promise it's not as bad as it looks, and you're probably misunderstanding things. I'm still yours and definitely not going anywhere." My brows furrow, and I try to make sense of his words and the conversation I heard earlier. "So, you're not getting married to Selene?" I don't wait for an answer before firing the next question. "And you didn't deny me being your fated mate in front of Liam?" I am done playing whatever game he has rolling and demanding straight answers. He can save the word twists and level-headed conversation for one of his board meetings. His posture shifts from relaxed to tense, and he takes a defensive stance. "That is completely different. We agreed to keep our

bond secret till the time was right."

"No, Lucien. That was not what happened. You wanted to keep us secret. I merely agreed with you, and you totally skipped the first question. Are you getting married?" My voice trembles, betraying my emotions.

Lucien's eyes soften, and he gets off the sofa, walks to me, and takes my hand in his. "It's not that simple, Rora. That's why I asked you to sit so we could talk about it. It's really not much of a big deal when you look at it from a different perspective. I'm certain you'll come to see it's probably for the best and still works in our favor."

It's not that simple. It's not much of a big deal. It's probably for the best. Three words that have no business being put in the same sentence swim in my head, intensifying both my anger and confusion. I try to make sense of what he is saying. There's absolutely no way he implied that the situation is not so simple and goes on to say it works in our favor in one breath. Pain slams into me like a moving train, wrecking every part of me. This is different from what I felt when I heard his conversation with Liam or the hurt from his father offering me money. This is raw, unfiltered, and unbridled. This is him talking to me. "Make it simple, Lucien. What is in the cards for us?" He draws in a deep breath, his hand falling from my cheek. Distance. It was the first sign of betrayal. They break physical distance before dealing you the last blow. Despite my heart desperately clinging to the hopes of a different answer and the hurt of my wolf seeping into me, I brace myself for impact.

"A war is coming, Rora," he starts, his eyes looking everywhere but at me. "My father is too old to head the battle, and his smoking habit has taken a toll on his health. So, he intends to make me alpha soon."

He is finally going to be alpha. It was the moment we've been waiting for. It was the moment that was to birth a new beginning for our relationship. But this feels nothing like the beginning I have been anticipating. I nod, urging him to continue. "To certify

our victory, we need to make alliances that'll give us an edge over Silver Pack, and my marriage to Selene would secure that."

His words cut like a blunt knife, but I probe further, wanting to get to the root of things. "Did you tell your father I am your fated mate?" "I did. But you know my position. My parents were not even fated. Fate is rarely considered when choosing a Luna in our pack. It's more about who is suitable, possesses the required attributes, and can contribute to the strength of the pack."

"And I do not possess these qualities," I finished off, my voice low and dripping with pain. I had already got an earful from his father.

If hearts could actually break, mine would be scattered on the floor in a pool of blood, battered into pieces for all to see.

Not too long ago, I was told my degree and academic performance meant nothing to the pack, and now, I'm being told I wasn't enough for the person the Moon Goddess picked out for me. I gave up every piece of my life to be told I wasn't enough. "Aurora," Lucien takes a step closer, and I take one back, not willing to have him close to me. "This doesn't change anything, you know." I look at him with raised brows, confusion etched on my face. "You're getting married, Luc. This changes everything." He swallows the space between us in one step, cradling my face in his hands. "No, baby. It only changes things if we let it."

"What do you mean?" I'm not ashamed to admit I am almost begging at this point, pleading for him to come up with something. Heck, I wouldn't mind if he asked that we elope. I would follow him without a second thought. Anything to soothe this burning ache in my chest. "Selene and I are not in love and will be only married on paper for the good of the pack, but you'll always have me. I'll make sure you have the best life. Everything you need will be provided, and you'll never want for the rest of your life. I swear it. We don't have to let this come between us."

I'm frozen on the spot, staring at him like I have just seen a ghost, while he maintains his calm exterior like he didn't just ask me to live the rest of my life like a skeleton in his gold-encrusted wardrobe. Realization slowly seeps through the fog of pain, clouding my senses, bringing with it a clarity I have never possessed. At no point in his statement did he leave room for me to give an answer. No question was asked. No request was made—nothing. He said it with the same tone you'd tell a chef to bring your food, and it was the most natural thing and required little to no effort on his part to convince me. He is certain I'll take the offer, and like any good chef, I'll come through with exactly what he needs. No bargains, no negotiations. Just him telling me what is best for us and knowing I'll accept it like I've done in the past.

A wishful part of me wants to fight against the truth in front of me. I want to believe I heard him wrong. Even more, I want to believe that I got the wrong message from him and that the way I am feeling is the result of miscommunication and not him dismissing my emotions like a minor inconvenience. But with one look at his perfectly sculpted face and piercing blue eyes, I know he meant every word he said, and even worse, he stands by them.

"You want me to be your mistress," I finally say, removing myself from his orbit. "You want me to be your mistress, Lucien?"

I let out a humorless laugh, completely in awe at the universe's sense of humor. Lucien looks worried and tries to take a step closer, but I stop him with a look. "You sound like you have it all figured out."

"Aurora—" I lift a finger, cutting him short. "Was this always the plan? Fill me up with promises of a future together and toss me to the side with even more promises." "Aurora, you're getting it all wrong. If you would just calm down and be less emotional and more sensible, you'll see that this is best for us. We get to have each other without having expectations hanging on our shoulders. We'll be each other's safe space away from the pressure of the rules we will be forced to play. It

will be heaven." "Woah." It's the only sound I can muster as I watch him. His calm exterior finally breaks and a mix of frustration and desperation spills through the cracks, but it disappears at the same speed it appeared, restoring the sterile calm. "Say you'll think about it, at least. I didn't plan for this conversation to go this way." "Of course you didn't." My voice grows louder, but I'm too angry to care. I spent three years of my life clinging to his every word, changing plans and tailoring my future to fit into his, only to be reduced to the position of a whore on the side. "Let me guess, you expected me to throw a little tantrum, but when you present your perfect plan, I will calm down and go along with it like a good girl, and you will win both sides? Or wait, I have something even better. I pledge myself eternally to you as your perfect heaven on the side, and you go on to live the best life with your wife while I watch from the sidelines, grappling for whatever scraps you throw at me. Is that really the life you want for me?"

My eyes are blazing, and my vision is blurred by both tears and rage. He averts his gaze, sealing them to the floor. He gives no reply, and he does not look at me. I got my answer.

"Three years, Lucien. Three years of completely devoting my life to you and hanging on to your promises, and you offer me the position of your private whore."

He opens his mouth to talk, but I don't let him. "It's been a funny couple of days, you know," a dry chuckle escapes my lips as the events trickle into my brain. "Tell me, is it all part of the plan? Get me humiliated in the company before sending Daddy to slap a check in my face? You didn't have the balls to do it yourself, so you had to devise other means?"

"Aurora..." he opens his mouth and closes it, worrying lines marking his confused expression. "I had no hand in what happened at the company, and," he pauses like the meaning behind my words just hit him. "My father offered you what?" If this were a few hours back, I would've fallen for his confused and lost expression, dismissed

everything I'd heard, and clung to his words. But now, I know better. He just made me the same offer. He is just like them. Scratch that. He is worse.

"You know, when I applied for the position of the assistant finance officer and got offered the role of a janitor, it hurt like hell, but I was ready to take the pain if that is what it takes to be with you, and when your father promised me the most lavish lifestyle if I leave the pack, it hurt more, but even after hearing your conversation with Liam, I couldn't bring myself to trade you for money. It might be stupid, but a part of me hoped you'd come through with the perfect explanation. I trusted you, Luc. Down to the very end when I had no reason to." I feel a wet tickle on my cheeks, but I make no attempt to swipe it off or hide it. I am done putting up a strong front when I am practically falling apart on the inside."At least your father was decent enough to know that being in close range would hurt me and offered me a life outside the pack, but you," the words catch in my throat, and a pained sob slips from my lips. "You ask me to stay on the side like some dirty piece of trash and tend to the fire in your loins while you live your dream life with another woman."

Lucien opens his mouth and closes it again, his shoulders low and his eyes shining with something I refuse to acknowledge. He tries to come close again, but I shake my head, taking a step back. "Aurora, you're taking this the wrong way," he finally manages to say. "I think this all took a different turn. I'm sure we can fix it if we slow down a bit."

"I'm taking this the wrong way?" I do nothing to mask the disbelief I feel at his words. "You broke a promise you made to me, reduced me to a charity case before your friend, and I am taking it the wrong way?" He doesn't answer, and I shake my head. Now that I think of it, I've never seen a line of wrinkles on his face. He always looks so sure of himself, like he has cracked some secret code to life that only he knows. I used to mistake it for confidence, but now I see it for what it truly is. It's present in the way he carries himself around and the way he is currently looking at me like I am acting out of place. The high and mighty air of "I am better than you. I

am better than everyone else, and I know what is best" swirls around him, mocking me and my emotions.

A pained smile plays on my lips as the final realization settles into me, taking with it every shred of hope I have been nursing. I can go on and on for years, cry a river and rip my heart open for him to see, and he'll still find a way to shove whatever he thinks is right down my throat. No regard for me or my breaking heart, just him and what serves him. "I deserve more than what you and everyone in this pack keep shoving down my throat."

Lucien's eyes briefly widen as if he is only just understanding the implications of his words, but that does nothing to make me feel better. He is who he is, and the interest of the pack and everyone else will always come before me.

Without another word, I race out of my house, feeling the bond between us weaken with every bit of distance I put between us. I don't look back. Instead, I forge ahead, channeling every bit of energy in me into pushing my body past its limit. Maybe if I run far enough, I might outrun whatever effect our bond has on me and possibly escape the clutches of the soul-numbing pain spreading through me. My muscles start to rage, my lungs are burning, and I'm damn well wheezing, but I still can't shift. I try, but my wolf only retreats into herself, the pain of it all too much for her to bear. I am left to deal with the human side of me, another reminder of how weak and inadequate I am—a disease, as Alpha Willams said. The universe really does have a way of laughing in your face and pouring salt into your injury till the very core of your existence is reduced to a mindless search for relief. Eventually, my legs give out, and I fall into a damp heap of rotting leaves and fallen branches. A loud cry forces its way out of my lips, scaring the birds and sending the squirrels running to safety. I remain there for a moment, straining my ears for a footstep or sign of life, but I'm blanketed by the deafening silence of the woods.

Lucien does not come after me. No one does. Then it dawns on me that I could die in

these woods, be food for some predator, and no one would notice my absence. A vast majority of my existence was tied to Lucien and the role I was to play in his life, and with that gone, I am nothing. Just an orphan half-blood with a broken heart and scars to show for her pathetic existence. Where should I go?

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Lucien

"I just knew they were going to end up with each other. I remember always seeing them together when they were kids. Liam is there, too, but you could always tell he was the third wheel," Aaron Clarke, one of my father's close friends, says. The table erupts in laughter, mostly at Liam, while some of the women send Selene and me dreamy eyes like they were reliving their days of young love through us.

"I'll have to prove you wrong and protect my pride, Sir Aaron. I was never the third wheel. In fact, I was the fun one and only offered to take them under my wing to share some of my awesomeness." The men laughed again, and Aaron and Liam fell into a playful banter, with Aaron telling Liam he'll have to pick a mate after me.

The conversation at dinner is kept light and away from politics and like topics, mostly because of the women. It's something I'm greatly appreciative of as it means I have to speak very little and smile when necessary.

Selene, on the other hand, looks like she was raised for this moment. She knew the right words to say, the right answer to every question, and the right question to make her appear interesting without seeming dumb. I must commend the work of her parents. Her mother is practically glowing with pride.

"Son," Liam's father calls, "What do you think of my daughter? I know I did a great job, but I'd love to know if her future mate appreciates her."

My father let out an exaggerated groan, "Don't be ridiculous, Peter. What do you mean future mates? They're already mates. The ceremony is almost a month away

and just a formality."

The others laugh again, but it's a short one as all attention returns to me, waiting for my answer.

I clear my throat, taking her hand in mine to make the moment more endearing. "Selene is a wonderful woman. I am constantly in awe of her, and I consider myself extremely lucky to call her mine." I shift my attention to the current beta. "You say you did a great job, sir, but I beg to differ. I think you outdid yourself with her. "Same goes to you, ma'am," I add, directing my words to his wife before turning to Liam. "And, of course, no thanks to you."

The table is a mix of awws and laughter. My father sends me a discrete nod of approval while Selene's lips tip in a discreet smile, but I catch it. She must be proud of herself for securing an alpha. It's what she was raised for.

Rora won't look so smug. I silence the voice in my head, choosing to focus on the task at hand. The last thing I need is some stupid voice comparing Selene to Aurora. Aurora is obviously prettier. She's only being a bit too stubborn right now. She's trying to teach me a lesson.

That's the only explanation.

Aurora is mad, furious even, but she's not really gone. She would never leave me, not like this.

I lean into my chair, pulling my fists under the table to hide how tightly clenched they are. An angry vein throbs in the corner of my head.

She's testing me. One of those stupid push-and-pull games women play to get you eating out of their palm.

A power move. She's somewhere in the woods, waiting for me to come crawling after her. The thought alone leaves a bitter aftertaste. Too bad I don't play into anyone's hands. She can wait.

She can drag this out for hours, sulking and pouting at what happened, but she'll come back. It's not like she has anywhere to go. She was born and raised in this pack, and as far as my memory goes, she's not in contact with the human side of her family, and she barely made any friends in college.

She'll eventually see the wisdom in my offer and realize the gravity of the sacrifice I'm willing to make for her.

Hell, I told the woman she'll always have me, and my mate will only be relevant in title. I told her I'd give her the best life, practically promised myself to her, and all I got in return was a disappearance act. Any girl in the pack would die to be in her position. Why is she making this out to be something else?

"Lucien?" Selene's soft voice pulls me out of my reverie. "I wanted to thank you for your kind words."

I blink twice, a fleeting veil of confusion clouding my thoughts before I remember what she's talking about. Noting the eyes on us, I force a smile on my face. "They're not kind, dear. They're true."

It's funny how much I have to force a smile, affection, and fake touches when I'm with her. These things come to me with ease whenever I'm with Aurora. I feel this pull to her that I can't resist. I want to hold her. I want her close to me at all times, and the laughter is never forced. It's warm and hearty. Now that I think about it, I can't recall a moment with her where I didn't feel like I was transported to another universe.

I discreetly pull out my phone, swiping through my call log and voicemails, and

there's no call from her. It's all I can do to keep myself from throwing the phone at the wall.

The chattering at the table only adds to my growing irritation. Seven days. Seven fucking days. It's how long it's been since she ran out of her house expecting me to pull a Prince Charming and chase after her. Don't get me wrong, I know women love that type of shit, and on a very good day, I don't mind indulging, but she's supposed to know it's hardly ideal with the situation at hand.

Dinner finally comes to an end, and I'm very happy to call it a night. Somewhere between dropping Selene off and making my way home, I end up in Aurora's house.

I'm yet to make up my mind about what I'm going to say to her when I see her. I initially planned to wait for her to come to me, but it seems I'll have to take charge of this one like I always do.

It's dark by the time I get to her house, and the small cluster of trees behind casts a darker blanket on the surroundings. If she's playing a game of hide and seek, she should at least come home to get some food. I suck in a deep breath, reminding myself to stay calm before knocking.

No response. I knocked harder, and when nothing happened, I twisted the doorknob, and the click that followed sent a tinge of suspicion through me. Rora never leaves her house open. No matter how urgent the situation is, she has always been a bit too security-conscious, especially with the situation with Silver Pack and her living alone. It doesn't matter what the situation is; Rora always locks her door. I let myself in, flicking the light bulb in the process. Then I freeze.

The air is stale. The windows are closed, and the blanket she was snuggling in the last time we spoke remained at the same spot. Even her scent was barely there. I had to strain my nose to pick up muted whiffs. The alarms in my head immediately went off.

Something isn't right.

"Aurora!" I made my way to her bedroom to find her bed neatly made. Her brush on the table had collected a bit of dust, and her nightwear lay carefully folded on the reclining chair in the corner.

"Aurora!" I call again, my voice louder and more urgent this time. I throw the bathroom door open—nothing. I check the adjoining room and kitchen—nothing. Even the fridge was half-stocked, and most of the groceries in the kitchen had gone stale. To my right, there is a butter knife with leftover butter and crumbs of bread collecting mold on it. The little alarm in my ears shifts to loud sirens with an increasing heartbeat to match.

I throw the back door open and march into her makeshift garden. Her little plants withered and dying is all the confirmation I need. Rora would rather starve than let anything happen to these plants.

My breath turns sharp, my pulse a hammering thing in my chest as I move frantically now, tearing through the house, throwing open cabinets and drawers, anything to give me a cue. Still nothing.

Where would she go? I rack my brain to see if I can recall her mentioning a new friend in the pack or somewhere else, and I come up with nothing.

I remember her musing about how it'd be cool to at least know her human family, but she never said anything about meeting any of them. Her father's side pretty much cut her off after her father's death, claiming her mother tainted their bloodline with her human genes. Rora would sooner bleed to death than go to them.

So where would she be? A sharp pain lances through my chest, making me stumble. Not the tangible kind of pain. Something deeper, and it's immediately followed by a

sinking hollow feeling.

I don't pay much attention to it. It's probably my wolf acting up over the perceived danger our mate might be in. I reach into my pocket, pulling out my phone.

A few taps and the number of my best tracker pulls up. I waste no time in dialing.

The line connects, and I don't bother with pleasantries. "Aurora Belmont. I need you to find her before sunrise." His answer is quick and affirmative. I ended the call after offering a few helpful details and returned the phone to my pocket. I will my heart rate to slow down and my pulse to quiet, but a beep from my phone almost startles me.

Did the tracker find her already? I knew she was just hiding in the corner. I open my phone, and the bitter taste of bile climbs to my tongue. An updated wedding program from my father. He has succeeded in bringing the date two weeks closer, making the day exactly eleven days away. At this point, he might step up and be the groom himself since he is so invested. From the day the news was broken to me, it's been one occasion or the other. An appearance at the court or pack gatherings together.

Photoshoots at strategic positions, cake tasting, cloth fittings, and even mindless walks around the pack to show ourselves to the members. I do my best not to make Selene look like a fool or disrespect her family. A division between the families would bring everything to dust, but I've intentionally decided not to take part in the planning and only make an appearance when I must maintain the fantasy we are selling to the pack members.

In the beginning, it was mostly because I didn't want Rora to see us being all cuddly in public too soon. Eventually, I just figured out I didn't appreciate being paraded. I've agreed to marry the girl. We can all give it a rest. Arranged marriages are not foreign to my kind, especially for those in power. If anything, it's more common than

a fated bond. Regardless, it's important to maintain a unified front. The slightest sign of division in the family is a sign of weakness, and it's only a matter of time before someone decides to make a funny move.

I didn't bother sending a reply to my father. Despite my irritation and rising worry about Aurora's actions, I find myself slightly wishing she stays wherever till the mating ceremony blows over. The last thing I need is for her to witness the entire thing. With one last look at the house, I turn off the lights and make my way out with a heavy sense of foreboding I can't put a finger on.

"Don't you look dapper in a suit?" Liam whistles, fastening the belt on his waist. "With a face like that, one will think you're walking to the guillotine and not your wedding ceremony."

I pay him no heed, focusing on my reflection in the mirror as I adjust my tie. I expect today to be a lot of things. Happy for some, fulfilling for others, and a reason to drink and merry for the rest. What I never paid attention to is the effect it'll have on me. It is merely a ceremony. All I have to do is perform the rights and mark her in the presence of witnesses, and it'll be done. Easy peasy. Everyone is happy, and life goes on.

This feeling of impending doom looming over me is one I never saw coming. And for what is worth it, Liam is right. I do feel like I'm being led to my death.

"Heard from Aurora?"

Of course, the idiot will decide to bring her up while I'm preparing to walk down the aisle with another woman. He has refused to give it a rest since he overheard me shouting at the trackers and ordering them to find her in the next 48 hours a few days

ago. Forty-eight hours went by. Seventy-two went by, and still, there was no Aurora. There was not even a phone call or response to the million texts I sent her. I've been trying to keep my thoughts about her at bay and convince myself that this is the best decision, and what I did, as painful as it might've been, is for the best and to secure the future of the pack.

"You seem to have developed a very deep interest in her. Why don't you go search for her yourself."

"I don't know, man. You said it yourself. She has nowhere to go. I can't shake off the feeling that she was attacked, or worse, captured by Silver Pack."

"She is fine." I snap, taking a deep breath to mask my heaving chest. "She is fine. She's probably waiting for the wedding to blow over before making an appearance."

It's the reason I've been giving myself. It feels better than the rest, and it is also more believable. I concluded that she wouldn't be happy to stay in a space where the hot topic is the wedding of her fated mate to another and has decided to stay away till it blows over. That's what this is about: self preservation. That's what this is about. No stupid predators and running away.

"That makes sense," Liam concurs. "I would stay away for a while if it were me."

We fall into a comfortable silence. He adds finishing touches to his outfit while I drag out every part of mine.

I've never had plans for my wedding. I never had the time to sit around and think about what the day will look like. I mostly listen to Aurora talk about everything she wants and promise to make it happen. She wants an outdoor celebration in one of the valleys with peonies decorating the entrance for the wedding and white lilies scattered around for the actual mating ceremony.

Most people settled for a mating ceremony without a wedding reception, but Rora wanted it all. In her words, after hiding away for so long, she wanted to experience everything with me. She wants to have all the memories and the joy that comes with it.

She also wanted a ball gown with a long train and a huge bouquet of many flowers. She wants to feel like a princess, and I told her she would make the most beautiful princess.

Most of my comments were to keep the conversation going without making her feel she was alone. Now, standing at the top of the podium in the pack multipurpose hall, I can't shake off the feeling of my senses screaming at me to walk out the door.

There are no peonies, lilies, or decorated entrances. In fact, the whole place is devoid of colors and flowers. White walls with intricate gold markings and minimalist design. Everything is tasteful and aesthetically pleasing, but it lacks a soul.

The entrance song for the bride comes on, and I make the mistake of raising my head. Selene was dressed in a mermaid gown with a very short veil and modest white roses. No ball gown in sight and no multi-colored flower arrangement.

Bile rushes up my throat, and I forcefully swallow. To the audience, I probably look like a smitten groom swallowing the rush of emotions from seeing his bride. I am swallowing emotions, just a different kind—the kind that urges you to run and never look back. The type that crawls into your ears and repeatedly gives you every reason why this is a bad decision.

I quickly scan the crowd, seeking out the face that's been glued to my mind for the past couple of days. My eyes catch Liam, who is already watching me with concern. Sometimes, I hate how well the idiot knows me. He has not said anything about Aurora being my fated mate since the first conversation, but I don't miss the look in

his eyes.

I find my father watching me with a look that spells, "Do not embarrass me." I spot other familiar faces, most of them smiling and sending me little waves, but I don't see her.

Selene gets to the stage, and I offer a few compliments before the minister, usually the oldest man in the pack, opens the ceremony.

This part is usually for the wider audience and is a lot like a regular human wedding. It's for the view of the public and gives us the opportunity to celebrate with the human friends we've made along the way.

The main ceremony comes at night where the marking and exchange of oaths takes place. "You may now kiss the bride."

The statement comes to me as a threat. I had completely forgotten about this part of weddings. Dread washes over me as I lift Selene's veil, trying my best to keep my fingers from trembling. A cocktail of disappointment, self-loathing, and sadness burns my throat when I reveal her artfully made-up face.

I suck in a deep breath, leaning in to capture her lips. The sooner we do this, the faster we get it over with. Her lips are soft and thin, nothing like Aurora's luscious plum lips. It's tasteless and stirs no emotions in me. I want to pull away and wipe my lips, but I know what that will look like, so I deepen the kiss, trying to picture Aurora's face instead of Selene's.

It works for a while till someone lets out a wolf whistle, pulling me out of the act. I can almost swear I see Aurora's face flash through my eyes when I pull back. Guilt pools in the pit of my stomach, and I fight the urge to get off the stage.

We move to the reception, where I'm assaulted with congratulations from friends and business colleagues. My cheeks hurt from faking a smile, and every time I'm pulled aside for a brief conversation by some of my human acquaintances, I sigh in relief, glad to be away from the spectacle.

I won't stop searching for Aurora. Any time I sense a movement through the entrance, my eyes snap to the direction, and I'm doused in buckets of disappointment when another unfamiliar face waltzes in.

I don't know what I'll do when I see her, but I do know I need to see her. None of this makes sense without her. Nothing makes sense with her. I feel like a monkey parading in a circus and playing a part. I want to rid myself of this ridiculous tux, ask the guests to return to their homes, and forget this ever happened.

I've come to know why I never thought about weddings and the rest of it. When you already have a picture painted for you just the way you like it, you don't bother painting one for yourself. Aurora had everything planned out, giving me the luxury of being a passenger for the ride. What I didn't know was how much I internalized her plans as mine. How deeply her words are ingrained in my soul and how tangled our dreams and future have become.

The realization hit me like a blunt hammer, and I grip the table next to me for support, smiling at the guests in front of me while a cascade of chaotic events unfolds in my head.

The ceremony comes to an end, and I waste no time rushing out under the guise of unavoidable pack business. Reckless as it may be, I find myself driving to Aurora's house. I turn the house upside down, searching for a clue on her way about.

My mating ceremony is less than five hours away, and I am in the house of another woman looking through her things to see if I can find anything that'll point me to her.

You should've started sooner, my inner thoughts mock, and I let out a string of curses. How was I supposed to know it would come to this? When she ran off, I figured she needed some time to calm down, think things through, and come back when she was in a better state of mind. I couldn't exactly seek her out myself without raising suspicions, hence the commencement of a search for her. But as time went by, a new fear rose in me. What if she is truly gone?

The chances of that were next to zero, but it isn't completely impossible. What if this was the last straw, and she finally left? But where would she go without her belongings? She didn't take anything with her.

My phone vibrates for the hundredth time, and I finally pick it up to see a text from Liam asking where I am and how I need to start getting ready for the ceremony. I feel like a trapped animal. The feeling of helplessness and not being in control is alien to me.

I've always had total control of every part of my life, and now, one girl leaves, and I can't seem to find my bearing. I let out a frustrated yell, driving my fist through the wall. The pain is more intense than it should be, and my bones don't snap back in place fast enough. But it's also distracting me from the chaos in my mind, so I pay it no heed.

Deciding it's best to focus on the task at hand and deal with the others later, I make my way back to the pack house and prepare for the mating ceremony. Liam watches me the whole time, his eyes never leaving the bruise on my fist, but he doesn't say a word.

The full moon finally sets, and we move to the middle of the woods, a legendary spot said to host a balance of all the elements. It's a spot where the Moon Goddess and ancestors come to mingle with the living. It is the spot for sacred rituals and mating ceremonies.

The moon casts its silver light in the clearing, providing ample illumination to the spot. My father, Liam's family, and a few important members of the pack step into the clearing as core witnesses while the rest of the pack waits a few paces behind.

The ceremony begins with the exchange of oaths between Selene and I, a set of promises to love and protect each other before proceeding to the part I dread the most. The marking. I'll have to sink my teeth into the side of her neck, and she'll do the same to me, causing our wolf spirits to be bound to each other.

Selene moves her hair back, baring her neck to me. The movement sends a whiff of her scent down my nostrils: strawberries and jasmine. Nice but it doesn't trigger the primal beast in me. I want vanilla.

"Lucien?" she calls, angling her neck for me to bite. Sweat collects on my forehead. A neck has never seemed so dangerous in my life. It feels like I'm about to take a bite of poison.

"Go on," the minister urges, and I shut my eyes. Just as my canines extend to mark her, an agonizing scream pierces through the gathering, followed by a torn limb flying through space and landing on the floor in front of me. The entire place erupts in chaos, mothers are screaming for their children, and fathers are gathering their families and taking them to safety.

"What is happening?" Liam asks, standing next to me as the rest of the pack warriors, including the older ones, assemble, taking a battle stance.

My eyes narrow as I await the next attacker. "Silver Pack."

As if on cue, a large black wolf lunges out of the dark and makes a beeline for me. Others emerge, and the warriors lunge at them. Battle cries fill the space, and blood and scattered limbs follow. I try to shift, but for some reason, I can't.

I try harder, my eyes not leaving the wolf. Its eyes are glued to me, skillfully maneuvering its way around attackers without engaging. What the fuck is going on? I know my wolf has been sulking since the situation with Aurora, but this is hardly the time to put up an attitude. There are lives and properties involved, for fuck's sake.

My wolf does not share my concerns for life and valuables and continues to block me out. The wolf draws nearer, and for the first time, I am faced with an emotion I never thought possible for me to conceive: fear—raw, unfiltered fears course through me, chilling me to the bone. My heart is beating so fast that I can feel the blood rushing into my ears. My forehead is covered in sweat, but my skin feels cold from the nerves erratically firing through me.

I can't afford for my pack members to witness me like this, but at the same time, I am no coward. I won't run away. My wolf is not the only one who got trained in the camp. My human body suffered a great deal of training to be able to hold a wolf like mine. Surely, I can hold my own down in this form. I quickly scan my environment, finding a low-hanging branch to my left. I broke it off the tree and prepared myself for the attack.

I position myself, waiting for the wolf to get close, and he does. I waste no time in attacking, my makeshift weapon aiming for the exposed abdomen, but it swerves to the right, dodging my attack and trying to slash my side.

My reflexes are quick, and I move in time to dodge the attack. I regain my balance and prepare for the next attack. The wolf snarls at me, saliva dripping from the corner of his lips as he stalks me.

I had moments in training where I had to challenge a wolf to combat in my human form, but it was nothing like this. The fights weren't as hostile, and the attacker was not after my life.

The wolf attacks again, and this time, I crunch to the floor, jutting out the sharp end of my branch. Just as he is about to descend on me, I send the branch into his stomach, driving it deeper with so much force that blood gushes through the opening and onto my face. The wolf let out a pained growl before going silent.

The victory restores a bit of hope in me, so I hold tight to my weapon and throw myself into the battle without a second thought.

The chaos is everywhere, and with my wolf absent, I'm barely able to differentiate enemies from friends. I rely on the few wolves I could recognize and some of the pack members fighting in their human form, following their direction, but that is barely enough.

A claw swishes past my face, missing my eyes by a hair's breadth. I turn to defend myself, but a white wolf beats me to it, tearing out the attacker's heart from his chest in one swift move. Selene. She's the only white wolf capable of such strength.

Another wolf lunges at me, but she attacks it mid-air, sinking her claws into its side and drawing out an agonizing cry from it. I am quick to spot a black wolf attacking from her back, and I send my weapon driving through it, going straight for the neck where I know it'll stand no chance of survival.

It's a quick kill, and it makes me feel slightly better about having a girl save me twice. I spot Liam biting off the head of a huge wolf while fending off the one in front of me.

Everything is in a state of mayhem and disarray. Loud cries from a distance let me know this is not the only side of the attack. The bastards picked the best time to attack. With everyone in a celebratory mood, our guards completely down, and no weapon to defend ourselves, we are vulnerable.

"Lucien!" A voice roars over battle cries and pained wails. I turn to find a naked and bloody Liam wrestling a wolf. "To your left, your father."

That's all he manages to say before shifting and pouncing on the wolf. My head whips to the left to find my father surrounded by three wolves, stalking him like a prey. They have him cornered to the edge of the clearing, almost concealed by the darkness of the woods. I scan the environment, wondering why no one is fighting next to him. Where is Liam's father?

Everyone is deeply involved in their own fight. The Silver Pack wolves outnumber us by a ratio of more than two to one. This is my fight.

Despite being outnumbered, my father maintains a solid stance, baring his canines at them and daring them to come closer.

The wolf in the middle makes the first move, but my father skillfully dodges his claws, driving his into the wolf's hind leg. There's no doubt that he is a wonderful fighter. He was the best in his time, and coming face-to-face with him in battle was akin to death, but that was years ago.

Now he's older, and the sickness has weakened his abilities greatly. I don't wait for the next one to attack before making my way toward them. I enlist every strand of muscle in me, channeling all my attention inside to force a shift. I try till I can feel my muscles almost bulging out of my skin and my head throbbing from how hard I was concentrating, yet my wolf is no show.

Two wolves lunge at him at once. One hops on his back while the other attacks from behind. Soon, the third joins, going straight for his ears. His cry of pain shoots straight into my heart.

I let out a shout of pain, running to him with my weapon in hand. I won't stop trying

to shift. My vision is blurry, and I can't see through the rage crowding my vision. All I want to do is lunge at them and tear out their heads with my teeth.

"Liam," I scream when I notice I might not make it in time to save him. The wolf on his back retracts his teeth, looking straight at me before sinking it into his neck and biting harder. My father screams in anguish. This time, a black wolf with white stripes jumps over me, heading to the spot, but we're both too late.

The wolf in front drives its claws into his chest, ripping his heart out in the process and carelessly discarding it on the floor.

A thunderous growl tears through the chaos, its effect causing an immediate pause in the ongoing battle. The sound is pained and torturous, reverberating loudly through my skull and leaving my throat dry.

I am at my father's side, gripping his limp body while his lifeless eyes stare back at me, accusation spelled boldly in them. Pack members begin to gravitate towards the scene, wide-eyed and slacked-jaw, as they take it all in.

Almost as though the aim of the battle has been achieved, the enemy wolves begin to retreat into the woods. I spot the wolf that delivered the final blow to my father, and rage surges through me like molten lava, clouding my vision with smoke and heat.

I reach out to my wolf one more time, injecting the pain and anger coursing through me to force a shift. Nothing would heal me like seeing the head of the pathetic beast rolling at my father's feet. Raining a bloodbath on Silver Pack will be the perfect way to draw the chaotic rush of emotions firing through my nerves, but nothing happens. I shut my eyes, clenching my jaws till my head hurt. I bite my gums till the metallic taste of blood assaults my senses. I command my wolf. I send threats to him, yet nothing. Not even a stir.

"Luc?" Liam's voice cut through the fog of rage and desperation encasing me. His eyes are filled with questions.

I shift my gaze to find the last wolf disappear into the woods, leaving Blackwood a bloody mess of torn limbs and battered bodies. It all happened in my presence. I watched them attack my home and tear us down, and there was nothing I could do, not even for my own father. I failed.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:43 am

Aurora

"Hurry, Ro. You're gonna be late for school!" I call out, loading the dishwasher.

"I can't find my drawing book, Mom," Ronan replies. I can hear him shuffling through the papers in his room and throwing things around.

I roll my eyes, making my way to the living room. We go through this almost every school day. He stalls under the pretense of missing a drawing book, even though he knows I put them in the same spot every night.

Just as I guessed, there's a booklet with shapes and figures on the second shelf of the mini bookcase in the corner of the room. "Found it."

A low groan echoes my victory, and shortly, Ronan's light steps follow. "Where did you find it? I searched everywhere for it."

He gestured towards the toys scattered on the floor as solid proof that he had searched everywhere.

If I wasn't already working with a tight schedule, I might've found the time to indulge his little game of pretense.

"How about you start your search from this spot," I point at the bookcase, "before proceeding to turn the house upside down."

His face split into a wide grin, mischief hiding behind his eyes. "Okay, Mama."

It is scary how much he looks like Lucien when he smiles. They have the same dimple on their right cheek and piercing blue eyes.

When I prayed to the Goddess to rid me of any attachment I had to Lucien, I didn't expect her to answer by putting his miniature clone in me.

I never thought it possible for a kid to pick mannerisms from a parent they've never met. I mean, everyone knows looks are passed through genes, but behavioral characteristics are often passed through presence and imitation.

The rules must've skipped my son because as he snatched his lunchbox from the table and headed for the door, his little legs somehow managed to move in a way that gave the left a slight kick, exactly how Lucien walks.

"Coming, Mummy?" he asks, holding the door. I snap out of my daze, masking my worry with a smile.

I steal a glance at him through the driver's mirror to find him swinging his legs and munching on a piece of carrot. "Snacking on your lunch already?" I ask, a smile playing on my lips.

"I like carrots." He pouts, and I let out a soft laugh. Another thing he picked from his father was an undying love for food.

"Be sure to have your fill. Remember, no eating in class." I recall his first day in school and his teacher asking if his lunch box wasn't a bit too big for a boy his age. I remember smiling and asking her to watch and see. When I returned, she couldn't stop talking about how she wished her daughter had an appetite as healthy as Ronan's.

A part of me knew it was the supernatural in him responsible for his strength and ability to consume so much food, but that is a topic I prefer to avoid till the time is

right.

I'll keep him sheltered for as long as I can. I refuse to let him have the life I had.

"We're here." I pull into the school parking lot and hop out of my car to help Ronan out. I catch the glances of a few passers-by thrown our way, or, should I say, at my car.

The Mercedes is the latest model I snagged for myself as a congratulatory gift after being promoted to the level of COO for the Phoenix branch of the Pinnacle Group. It was a splurge, but when I consider the years that led to this moment, I consider it a worthy gift.

"So, what did we say about break time?" I ask Ronan as I walk him to his class.

He recites the set of rules without missing a beat. "Stay close to the teacher. Don't speak to strangers, and don't take anything from anyone."

"Good boy," I cheer as we walk into his class. I hand his things over to his teacher and turn back to Ronan, bringing myself to his height. "You be good, and Mommy will come get you after school, okay?"

"Okay," He replies, standing on his tippy toes to place a wet kiss on my nose. The little charmer.

We do our little handshake, and he runs off to meet his friends at the corner. I catch a glimpse of one of them pulling out a toy from his pocket and displaying how it works to rest before returning to the parking lot.

Finding a great school that happens to be less than a ten-minute ride from my office was definitely the needle in my haystack of worry when I was searching for a school

for Ronan. I wasted no time enrolling him, and now, I enjoy the peace of not having to drive across the city every morning. I am at the office bright and early every day without having to deal with the hassle of the traffic.

"Good morning, Miss Veronica," Lily, my personal assistant, greets, taking my bag and handing me a file containing my itinerary and a cup of coffee as soon as I step into the reception of the humongous structure that is the Pinnacle Empire.

"You have a meeting with Mr. Adams at 10:00 a.m. He wants to discuss the safety of his funds and investment options. Lady Charlotte wants to expand her jewelry line and needs financial advice and suggestions. You also have lunch with Mr. Damon at 1:00 p.m.," she scrambles off, and my eyes follow her words on the file, soaking up the details of every activity she mentions.

"Seems like a packed day for me," I sigh, preparing my mind for the day ahead.

"I can always stand in for you if you want me to." Her voice is chirpy and too enthusiastic. I've never met a person so eager to help.

"Thank you, Lily, but this is, unfortunately, one of those days I have to handle alone." I take my right at the end of the hallway, bringing us to the door of my office. "We wouldn't want Lady Charlotte going off about our customer service, now would we?"

While running into Katherine almost three years ago at a networking event is obviously the best thing that has ever happened to me, and this job being my dream come true, my clients are a completely different topic.

Dealing with the creme d'coup of the society is not the easiest job in the book, and satisfying them is an entirely different story. It turned out to be the biggest challenge during my first year here. I was convinced on different occasions that Katherine would decide I wasn't good enough, but she merely said some of the best brains she'd

ever known have the worst people skills and went ahead to hire Lily to help with managing our clients and conducting a quick background check before I meet with them.

I didn't think it possible for a stranger to have so much faith in you till I ran into Katherine Lockhart, and our less than twenty-minute interaction was all it took for her to hire me on the spot. Our work relationship eventually turned into a full-blown friendship, close enough for me to let her in on my past and on the story of me and Lucien. After she discovered she was mated to a wolf shifter, of course.

She was the most supportive friend for the most difficult period and an even more amazing boss for the longest time. She was my ever-present confidante till she had to move to Europe with her mate to rule his kingdom. The distance didn't affect our friendship very much, and we still do our best to keep in touch. Still, there are moments I wish she were physically here with me."She seems like a really sweet woman." Lily hands me her tablet, and on the screen is a woman who looks to be in her fifties. She lacked the haughty "I'm better than you" air my regular clients wear like a second skin, but she did have an awfully straight and aristocratic nose, almost like Lucien's.

I held back a sigh, handing the device back to Lily, who continued to fill my ears with unending information about Lady Charlotte. For some reason that I can't seem to wrap my head around, Lucien has been making unwarranted appearances in my thoughts lately. It's not like there is a day that goes by without me thinking of him at some point. I love his miniature clone, but the frequency has definitely gone up a notch.

I push back that wave of sadness his name always leaves in its wake, forcing myself to remain grounded in the present. It's probably my wolf expressing her displeasure at my upcoming date.

She has been restless since I agreed to go on a date with Damon after he asked for the fifth time.

Five years after he treated us like vermin, and we went on a self-imposed sabbatical from men, she still manages to find ways to give him grace despite the pain he put us through. The traitor.

"You can let Lady Charlotte and every other person on the list know that the details of our appointment have not changed," I reply, thanking Lily for her hard work and dismissing her for the day. Another thing I'm yet to understand is calling to confirm an already set appointment. Where I come from, people set appointments and honor them, but over here, you have to remind them.

I make a quick trip to my private restroom, fixing my appearance, touching up my makeup, and getting into character for the day to come. My job is to help these people grow their wealth, give advice, and protect their finances, not to analyze their behavioral patterns.

It is a little past one by the time I am done with consultations. Lady Charlotte turned out to be an awfully hard-to-please woman with almost no idea what she wanted to do with her money. The meeting ended with me listing out options for her to consider and rescheduling for another day. I pack my bag and head to my next appointment, lunch.

Despite cutting through corners, it takes almost fifteen minutes to get to my lunch date. The restaurant has a soft ambiance. The mix of gold, cream, and rich brown blend deliciously to give off a vibe that screams luxury, but not in an obnoxious way that has you feeling like the menu will rip off your wallet.

I spot Damon waving from the corner. His face stretches into his signature boyish grin. How he manages to retain his boyish charms years after college is something I'll never understand.

"I was scared you wouldn't show up for a minute," he says, standing to pull out a seat for me.

I raise a brow at him, settling into the chair. "Why would you think that?"

"Let's see," he taps his jaw as though he's in deep thought. "It took seven years and ten tries to get a yes from you. Figured you probably said yes to get me off your back with no intention of actually showing up."

"It wasn't even up to ten tries." I laugh at the obvious exaggeration, and he throws his shoulders back, a playful smirk flirting on his lips.

"Okay, twenty. It was definitely twenty tries, with this being the twenty-first. Whoever said the third time's a charm should be turning in their graves. The saying should definitely be twenty times is the charm."

I snort out a laugh while he stares at me like my humor is lost on him, and that only causes me to laugh more.

Damon is an old friend from college who I ran into at a charity event a year ago, and despite his claims to have been in love with me since college and constantly dropping hints, I only ever saw him as just a friend till recently. My wolf stirs at the thought, but I pay her no heed. She can always go back to sulking after our lost mate. She managed to stay mad at me for weeks after I rejected Lucien, and sometimes, I'm pretty sure she called a truce because of Ronan. Regardless, I intend to have a great time today.

Lunch arrives shortly after Damon makes a full presentation of how he knows the menu by heart and taste buds and would love to wow me with the best dish from the kitchen.

"Wow. This is really good," I comment, taking another bite of pasta. I love the way it melts into my tongue without being soggy. Everything is so yummy."

"See, if you had said yes to me a long time ago, we'd be halfway through the best restaurants in Phoenix by now." He points to the chicken sauce next to me. "You should have a bite of that too. It feels like heaven in your mouth."

I let out a chuckle, failing to understand how one knows what heaven tastes like, but I indulge him, cutting a sizable piece and putting it in my mouth while he watches, waiting for my reaction.

True to his words, the chicken tastes amazing. It is easily some of the best I've had, but the reaction I get upon swallowing is the complete opposite of what I am feeling.

I clamp my mouth shut, constricting my throat to keep the food from coming back up. Damon hands me a glass of water, his face pulled into a worried knot. "Did you swallow a bone?"

I shake my head, chugging down the glass of water. The reaction is a result of my wolf's refusal to relax. She's had her panties in a twist since I got to this location, but I didn't expect her to feel so strongly about an innocent date. It's like she's agitating for something I can't place.

My attempts to calm her are met with strong resistance, so I lay down my cutlery, having no interest in making a fool out of myself. "Must be the cheese. I had a glass of milk during breakfast, and now the lactose-intolerant part of me won't let me hold down another bite of dairy." I lie through my teeth, hoping Damon doesn't put two

and two together.

He is a shifter, too, and it doesn't take much to sniff out when another wolf is not exactly impressed by your presence.

"Sorry about that. Should I order something different? Maybe dry and crispy?"

I open my mouth to tell him how much I love the meal and will order a takeout when we're done, but I'm hit with the mouth-watering combination of amber and sandalwood. My nose flares, and my ears prick up.

My wolf's agitation gives way to excitement, and my heart stops, sinking to the pit of my stomach as goosebumps trail the part of my neck that feels as though someone is shooting lasers through them. My joints lock in place, and every bit of me stiffens.

Goddess, no, no, no. Anything but this.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:43 am

Lucien

My meeting with Laurence Stone ended up taking more time than I anticipated. The old man knew of my intentions to break into the construction industry and decided to use the opportunity to make outrageous demands. Desperate as I may be, I am not one to be pushed around, and Laurence is currently on a fast track to find out why.

"I understand your interest in the upcoming campaign for my oil and gas business. It goes to show how much we have in common and how we'll make great business partners."

Laurence nods, lifting a glass of whisky to his lips. "I can promise to feature your company in the campaign, but I cannot offer you a part of my company."

His hands pause, and he returns his glass to the table. "I would think about this more if I were you, Mr. Ravenclaw. You won't get a deal like mine anywhere, and I think a seat in your company is a fair price."

I lean into my chair, toying with the ring on my finger. In my line of business, I've come across different types of businessmen. The good, the righteous, and the dirty. Laurence is a dirty bag from the depths of a public dumpster, and if he continues to play with me, I'll be more than happy to show him where his kind belongs.

"Mr. Stone, I think we might have encountered some form of miscommunication along the line. I am not asking to be a part of your organization. I'm merely seeking the passage that your current project will afford me."

"And I hear you, Ravenclaw, but passages don't come at a cheap rate," he replies, smirking. "Scratch my back, and I'll scratch yours." "If you insist." I smile in return, pulling out all the files I gathered on him and his dirty dealings. Smuggling, tax evasion, and everything in the book. "Guess I'll have to fling this one through the window and see what the reporters do with it, eh?"

His eyes narrow before he snatches the files from me, his eyes doubling in size as he takes in the words on the paper. "I didn't mean for it to come to this, Laurence, but you see, I hate being put in a tight corner. It brings out the worst in me."

"You will regret this, Ravenclaw," he threatens, his eyes blazing, but I don't miss the tremble in his voice or his shaking hands. He knows he has nothing on me, and this will be all I need to take him down.

Following my father's death and the temporary loss of my wolf, I put everything into building my business empire and expanding the strength of the headquarters, penetrating into multiple sectors and increasing the influence of shifters. It was all to distract myself from my current situation, but along the line, I've come to acquire a certain degree of ruthlessness. It's the only way to survive in this world, and I make sure my counterparts know I am not to be played with.

"Let me worry about the consequences of my actions, Laurence," I say, getting on my feet. "I expect an invitation on my table before the day runs out. We wouldn't want the proverbial wind blowing on the chicken, now would we?" I threw him a wink before downing my drink and heading out of the private area of the restaurant, a triumphant smile playing on my lips.

Phoenix is roughly two hours from Sedona, but the two couldn't be more different. While the city is big, hot, and populous, Sedona is a valley with beautiful views and nature. It's a great place for shifters but not so good for business. That's why most of our organizations are either in Phoenix or New York.

Construction is the last on my list, and after this meeting, I am certain I am on a one-track road to success. I revel in my post-success bliss, reaching for the phone in my pocket to place a call to Liam and instruct him on how to proceed when familiar laughter reaches my ears, stopping me dead in my tracks.

It took a moment for me to recognize her. Her hair is blonde and straight, giving her face a lifted look. If not for the way her hazel eyes widened at me, I might've missed her.

"Aurora." The sound barely left my lips, and I'm certain she didn't hear me, but I had to say her name to make sure it was her in the flesh. Her name tastes like the first bite of your comfort food after having the worst week or like a bird I've been housing in my mouth and refusing to set free.

"Aurora," I repeated, this time louder and taking a step towards her. She doesn't answer, and when I reach for her hands, she flinches, taking them off the table and tucking them on her lap.

The action stung, but I understand. I wouldn't be so thrilled to see me either.

"Who are you?" A gruff voice asks, and only then do I notice the polished man with dark eyes, jet black hair, and nice bone structure on the other side of the table. You can tell he spent a lot of time and money on his appearance despite the laid-back air around him. I'm not one to check out my fellow men. Frankly, I've never met a man I felt the need to size up, but he is on a date with Aurora, and I can't resist. He is a shifter, too, and that triggers a possessive instinct in me.

The urge to mark my territory overrides common sense, and before I can stop myself, I blurt out, "I'm Lucien, her fated mate. Who are you?"

I felt Rora stiffen at my words. Her eyes snap to mine, a mix of anger and disbelief

shining through them.

Mr. Polished appears taken back, his eyes bouncing from Rora to me.

"Is he telling the truth?" He directs his question to Aurora, who takes a sip of water before answering.

"I am fated to no one." I don't miss the slight tremble in her hand as she places the glass on the table, completely ignoring me.

Polished turns to me, "The lady does not recognize you, and I suggest you leave before I make you."

The son of a bitch. Who does he think he is?

"I believe the lady can speak for herself, and if she wants me out, she would have said that a long time ago."

He turns to Aurora with a raised brow, waiting for her to give a go-ahead, and I decide I am done with this charade.

"Five minutes, Rora. You owe me that much." Something in my voice must've surprised her because her head snapped to me like she wanted to confirm the words came from me.

"I owe you that much?" she echoes my words, her brows raised in disbelief. I hold her eyes. "You don't expect me to just walk away like I didn't see you after all these years." I don't care that we're in public, and I'm risking causing a scene. All I can focus on is how she's here in the flesh. Five years spent looking for a person strips you of certain characteristics, and vulnerability is not a thing of shame to you anymore.

She takes her time before turning to polished—I refuse to acknowledge him as her date. "I'll be back. Let me see what he wants." Her tone is flat and cold, but it's also the first time I've heard her voice in years. If I wasn't scared she might disappear, I would've shut my eyes to let the sound flow through me. I didn't realize how much I missed it.

"You have four minutes and twenty-five seconds left. If I were you, I'd quit gaping like a fish and start speaking. What do you want?" Aurora bites out the moment we step out of the restaurant. I physically recoil as though I've been slapped in the face. I thought she was cold when she spoke the first time, but this is next-level. I never knew she had a voice like that in her.

"You look well," I finally manage to say, and she gives me a look.

"Would you have preferred me starving and homeless? Too bad humans don't care about labels like a half-blood and pure-blood."

Shame tears my eyes from her and glues them to the floor. I can't bring myself to see the look in her eyes, knowing I am responsible for it. "I'm deeply sorry, Rora. There's not a day that passes that I don't regret how I treated you. I've spent the last five years looking everywhere for you. I have trackers and private investigators on the lookout. You've not left my mind since the day you left, and If I'm given the chance, I'd take it back."

She pauses, her brows lifting by a fraction. "You did what?"

I seize the moment to take a step closer. She does not recoil. "When you left, I felt like a part of me was ripped away. I waited for you to come home, but days passed, and you didn't. I was scared you might be harmed. I freaked out and sent a search party for you. They came back with no news, and my fear heightened I had—"

"Slow down," she puts up a finger, her brows furrowed in confusion. "Why did you have a search party looking for me? It's not like I snuck off in the middle of the night. You were there. You watched me leave. You didn't stop me. I even waited," she paused, drawing in a deep breath. "It doesn't matter what you did or why you did it. It's all in the past."

"But we've met again, and we can start off on a fresh start. Just give me a chance. Let me make up for the damage I've caused."

"This is not some fated second chance meeting Lucien. This is purely coincidence. Phoenix is not very far from Sedona. We were bound to run into each other one day. Whatever happened to your calculative and all-knowing logical brain?"

Her words cut deep, not only because they're sharp and ruthless but because of the truth in them. I wish I had prepared better for this. For someone I've spent a great deal of the past five years searching for, I didn't have the words to answer her questions.

A part of me still feels this is all a dream, and I'll wake up to find she's still missing. I can't believe she's in front of me, speaking to me—no matter how cold the words might be—and looking very well. I want to reach out and touch her, make sure she's not a figment of my imagination. Instead, I tuck my hands into my pockets to prevent them from reaching out. This is hardly the time to initiate body contact, and if my instinct is right, I have no doubt she'll scream for help should I lay a finger on her.

"I'm deeply sorry, Rora. I was young and foolish. I wasn't thinking right."

Her eyes immediately flare in anger. "No, Lucien, you don't get to play the young and foolish card with me. Young and foolish would be going along with your father's every whim without a fight. What you did has nothing to do with age and maturity. Even a child cannot be that cruel. That was intentional. It was premeditated. You thought it through and decided that humiliating me was the best line of action, and

you acted it out. So don't give me that crap and youthful exuberance. You were never like the regular youth to begin with."

Her outburst renders me speechless. I search my head for words to explain myself. I open my mouth a couple of times, but no sound escapes. I've never experienced this side of her, and I have no idea what to do with it. The Aurora I know is sweet, soft, kind, and understanding. The woman standing in front of me doesn't seem anything like that, and it scares me a bit. She glances at her wrist, her voice devoid of any emotion. "You have a minute left."

For some reason, the words have the same effect as being told you have just a minute left to breathe. "I was a fool. I was stupid, and I regret everything, every bit of it. I'm a different person now. Just give me another chance."

My eyes are wild. I'm breathless, and my chest is heaving. But she stands the perfect picture of cool and collected. "Time's up. Goodbye, Lucien."

My body springs into action as she turns, clasp my hand around her wrist to stop her. We both freeze, our eyes meeting at the point our skin touches. Charged sparks of electricity erupt from the spot, coursing through my body and sending a hum through me.

Aurora stills for a moment before blinking and tearing herself away from me, rubbing her wrist like she was burned by fire. She cast me one last look of accusation before fleeing into the restaurant.

I stand there, still dazed by the after-effects of our brief encounter. She lingers in the air like a perfume, and my body is still humming with excitement. A part of me is screaming at me to go after her and not leave till she gives an encouraging response lest she vanishes again. But the level-headed part of me that knows better hold still.

Whatever I expect will have to wait. The depth of my betrayal still weighs heavily in the air between us, and it'll take a while to undo the damage. But I'll be patient. It is enough to know where she is. I'll give her some time.

"She has a four-year-old boy? Any records of a husband, past or present?" I query, balancing my phone between my ear and my shoulder while scrolling through the document my PI sent. I doubt the man at the restaurant is her husband. He showed very little possessiveness to be one.

"There's none. There's also no record of any past relationships. Just her, her son, and her job. She did have a couple of difficult years before her ascent into the corporate world," the PI replies, causing me to scroll back to the top of the file where records of her juggling between a food processing factory by day, a bar at night, and a private tutor during the weekends stare back at me. Guilt clogs my chest, tightening my windpipe and leaving a bitter taste on my tongue.

"Thank you, Jared. That'll be all for now." I turn off my phone and focus on the file in front of me. Veronica St. Claire, COO of the Pinnacle Group. Who would've thought she was hiding behind a fake name all this while?

In less than 24 hours, Jared managed to assemble a detailed report on her, including her workplace. Her success with clients and multiple awards in the finance sector is plastered on every page.

My chest swells with pride as I skim through her achievements. I hate that I was not there for any of them, but I'm glad she is living the life she always wanted and doing what she loves. I swipe to the next page to find details about her son. Jared said he was unable to get a picture or anything tangible, but he did get the basics like age, skin and eye color, and the general gist.

Are you married? Did you find someone after me? Did my actions drive you into the arms of some idiot who knocked you up and abandoned you with a child? A long string of questions filtered through my head, each pointing an accusatory finger at me as the sole cause of whatever encounter she had.

The thought of her being married burned like acid, but I wouldn't put it past her. If she managed to stay hidden for years and keep her son away from prying eyes, she'd certainly have no problem hiding a man. Perhaps she got divorced, or the husband died.

I calculate the time she had to meet a new man, wed him, and have his kid. Unless she met him immediately after she left Blackwood and had his child first, the timeline wasn't tallying. At the same time, Aurora is not reckless by any measure and hates to rush into things. Something is not adding up. Another thought pushes into my mind, one suggestive of a paternity I lacked the balls to explore, causing me to slam the laptop shut.

My heart is throbbing from processing too much information and coming up with more questions than answers. If I continue, I might just find myself in an Aurora-sized hole with no way out. Not that I would complain. It's far better than being apart from her, but I need answers.

I flip the laptop back on, her beautiful face staring back at me. I meant it when I told her she looked good. Every inch of her looked incredibly improved—like she underwent some sort of upgrading program.

From the picture you can tell how well she is. Her skin is lush and supple to the touch. Light tingles erupt in my palms, a reminder of when our skin touched. I know it's a picture, and it lacks emotions, but I can't bring myself to hold eye contact with it. The guilt and shame from my actions won't let me be bold about my intention. There's a very slim chance that she'll be interested in forgiving me, much less giving

me a second chance. I mean, she acted like I burned her skin when I held her. She might flip me the bird and get a restraining order, but I intend to take whatever chances I get.

The doorknob twists and Selene steps into the room, wearing a lace, flowy night dress and a soft smile. "I thought we agreed on no work in the bedroom," she purred, slowly approaching me.

I return her smile, closing the file on Aurora and shutting down the system before she gets close. "This one is time-sensitive and requires a little more attention. But I'm done now."

She takes the laptop from me and sets it on the nightstand. "Good, because I have some use for you."

She wastes no time getting in bed and straddling me, but I am quick to stop her before she slides off the thin straps of her night dress. "I had a long day," I say through a tight smile. Selene is a beautiful woman, and the sight of her in this position should elicit a string of desires in any full-blood male, but I feel nothing, not even a spark. She dismisses my subtle rejection and proceeds to rock her hips back and forth on me. She gets no reaction. She releases a frustrated huff before sliding off me.

"It's been five Luc, five years of marriage and except the kiss at our mating ceremony and the few scattered around for public view, you've not touched me. I figured you might be dealing with the loss of your father and the situation with your wolf during the first year and didn't read much into your actions. I even extended the grace. But right now, if you can't stand me, why did you go ahead with this marriage?"

"Selene, I need more time. This thing with my wolf. I think it might've affected every part of me."

"Don't give that bullshit, Lucien, don't," she cuts me, her face the picture of frustration. "This is not about your wolf. it's about how you can't even get it up for me. There's no life down there, not even a twitch."

I hate when she gets like this, and we have these fights. Every part of our marriage is easy, and we've settled into some form of companionship. She takes care of some pack situations while I handle the business side of things and attend to the issues she can't.

After her display of bravery and leading the warriors to avenge my father's death, the pack members have come to develop solid faith in her and trust her to handle situations, giving me time to focus on other things.

Our relationship is comfortable, too. We have mutual respect for each other, have a few conversations, and share a few laughs. This is the only problematic side of things, and it's all my fault. I can't seem to find it in me to muster any form of desire for any woman since Aurora left. Even touching another woman feels like cheating. I just can't bring myself to do it.

Selene takes my hand, forcing my eyes on her. "We need an heir, Lucien." Her voice is softer. "The people are beginning to talk. They're asking if you're impotent or I am unable to carry a child. They're talking about the risks of having a leader without a way of sustaining his bloodline and how that exposes them to a power struggle after your demise. We both know what happens in times like that."

I understand what she is talking about. I have been met by a few people of influence to discuss my childlessness. Some offered to take me to a healer if there is need, and others highlighted the dangers of waiting. How important it is for me to have a child at an age where I can pass down my wisdom and experience to him like my father did and his father before him.

When it comes to raising a new heir, the training is a great exercise, but some things can only be passed from one alpha to another, and those are the important details.

I understand the risks, but it's not like I can tell her the situation. How am I to tell my mate that I can't touch her because I'm so committed to another woman that even in her absence, touching another would feel like cheating? How do I explain the state of my heart and how every inch of me calls out for another? I won't even be able to get it up if I try. It sucks to admit that, and it even sucks more that I had to find out too late. Aurora owns every inch of me. Even the breaths that I've drawn since the moment I realized she'd left me have been a silent plea for her return.

Running into her today worsened things by a great deal. Even the thought of a kiss with anyone left an unpleasant taste in my mouth.

"I understand, Selene, and I'm trying. I'll see if I can pay the healers another visit to ascertain the situation and what to do about it. I just need more time. Also, none of this is your fault. You haven't done anything wrong." The lie slips out of my mouth smooth as butter, and I feel Selene relax.

I feel instant relief knowing the matter has been squashed for the time being, but with the relief comes the guilt. Selene deserves better. She was roped into this situation just like I was, but somehow, she has managed to handle it with grace and very few complaints. I don't know how long I can stretch my lie, but I hope it can hold till I figure out what to do with Aurora and the way forward. The Goddess just gave me a second chance, and I have no intention of letting it slip out of my hands again.

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Aurora

Sitting at my desk, I grip my pen tighter, my knuckles white as I try to work on the numbers. I skim through the financial reports bulked in front of me, the numbers blur, and my brain refuses to focus on a thing.

Breathe. Just breathe. I take a slow breath, pushing away the restlessness that coils in my stomach.

I hear the faint sound of footsteps outside my office, and my mind drifts because I know who's coming.

It's impossible for me to ignore the weight of the situation. This project is a multi-million-dollar investment that will elevate my boss and the company. It is a perfect escape.

Despite expecting whoever it is, the knock on the door startles me. I exhale a deep breath I don't realize I'm holding. "Come in," I say, hoping my voice won't betray me.

The wooden door swings open, and the air from outside smashes against my face before I can even lift my head.

"Lucien," my heartbeat slams in my ears.

His presence sucks the oxygen out of the room as his scent fills my lungs, nearly choking me.

My fingers tighten, but I try to keep my expression straight. He stood straight on the other side of the desk, his arms crossed and eyes locked on mine.

His charcoal suit is designed to be perfect in every way. His sharp jaw grazes against his skin, and his lips form an intentional smile.

I fucking hate how he looks like a walking temptation.

His voice drips with amusement. "Not even a hello from you?" He cocks his head.

I crack my neck and straighten my shoulders. "What are you doing here?" My tone is professional.

His smile spread further. "I'm here for business."

I sigh deeply, exhaling, hoping my pulse will slow. "You're not on my schedule. You should have told me you were coming."

I'm hanging on a thin thread, trying to maintain a level of professionalism. I have no intention of letting him waltz into my workplace, clothed in confidence and an unspoken intention to rattle me. "Consider it a surprise." He takes a step closer, placing a sleek folder on my desk. His fingers brush against my hand. It was deliberate, and it lingered enough to cause my skin to prickle.

Gripping the edge of the desk, I jerk my hand away. "Lucien."

He leans in closer, lowering his voice. "Miss St. Claire," he slides a file on the desk toward me.

I clench my jaw as a shiver runs down my spine. He normally calls me Rora. I don't understand his angle. First, he appears at my lunch date to raise dust and say he's

sorry, and now, he's here being entirely.....well, being entirely Lucien. I guess everything at the restaurant was for shock and probably show. The leopard can't change its spots.I snatch the folder off the table, my eyes not leaving his as I rip off the cover, exposing the bold letters which highlight the subject of their contract. My breath whooshes from my lungs.

Blackwood Enterprises. Lucien's company is now an official partner on my project.

Why didn't I verify the details of this meeting? I'd been distracted by my encounter with him weeks ago and trying to purge myself of his haunting presence by throwing myself into work. Every job was welcome.I lift my gaze, curling my fingers around the paper to hide the trembles. "You planned this."

His blue eyes darken, unreadable. "It's a strategic partnership. Nothing more."

Bullshit.

I push the document back towards him. "We don't want Blackwood involved."

Lucien's fingers tap against the table in a slow manner. "I think you do. This expansion requires resources only this company can provide. Unless you have another plan, which would rather delay everything?"

I run my fingers through my hair as a sharp pain grips my chest. I have worked too hard to get to this spot, and I won't let him mess with me, even if I have to swallow my pride.

"Fine. Do whatever you want."

A cunning smile crosses his lips. "Of course."

I don't have any idea where the sudden heat came from. The office is suffocating, and one thing I know for a fact is that Lucien makes sure of that.

He drags out a chair and slumps into it, adjusting his suit. "I brought over some updates for the project. We could go over them together now that you've accepted my terms."

Forcing a smile that feels more like a grimace in between gritted teeth, I nod. "Let's get to it."

I sit in my chair as we dive into the project details. My body was present, but my mind couldn't help but wander. Every time he passes me a document, his hand brushes against mine, sending a ripple of shock through my body. The bastard is very aware of what he is doing. I've known him long enough to understand that with him, nothing ever just happens. He plans things down to the very last full stop.

He puts the laptop on the desk and scrolls through a particular document. I try to focus on the words on the screen, but all they do is blur in front of my eyes.

Every time I turn or make a movement, he does the same. He is right beside me. His arm brushes over mine when we lean over to view the spreadsheets. His breath scorches my ear as he points out the data.

Lucien pulls closer than I expect. His presence takes over the space, and I can't help it as my heart races at every given opportunity.

"So," Lucien begins, leaning back in his chair, his eyes never leaving mine. "What's the plan moving forward? We'll need some overtime to wrap this up."

I blink, startled. "Overtime?" I ask, my voice too sharp. "We can manage everything during normal hours. I can make sure of that."

Lucien smirks, his gaze more like he's having fun. "I'm sure you would make sure of that," his tone teasing, "but you would need someone by your side to get it done faster." I swallow hard, feeling my cheeks flush as I clench my fist. "I'm capable of handling this on my own."

One thing about Lucien is that he doesn't back down. He leans forward again, resting his arm on the edge of the desk. I see how his fingers twitch like he wants to reach out to me...to touch me. It makes me feel like I'm under a magnifying mirror while he tries to get every little detail of me.

"You know something," he continues, his voice lower now, more sensual, "I read through the clause of the contract, and it says somewhere that your boss hopes to penetrate the Asian economy. It's tough competition, but it's doable."

"I have no idea what he's driving at, but I raise a brow, urging him to continue. "I have a meeting coming up somewhere in Hong Kong. I was thinking we use that as an opportunity to see what we're working with," his gaze sweeps around my office, "away from the confines and distractions here—somewhere we can get first-level hands-on experience." What the fuck is he saying? Lucien is literally my distraction in this office.

Whatever he says hangs in the air as I don't respond to it, and I fight the urge to say anything.

A business trip with Lucien? Alone? I would rather manage being here with him than go on that business trip. "Lucien, that is not necessary," I decline, my tone firm. "We can handle everything here, and we will."

Lucien cocks his head slightly, his lips curling into a smile as he crosses his arms across his chest. "If you say so. But sometimes moving away from your workplace helps clear the mind, doesn't it? And it would give us more inspiration on what we're

working on," he pauses, scratching the middle of his head. "If you're worried about the fees, it's an all-expense paid trip sponsored by the company."

He is right, and that's what bothers me most. Even though I don't want to admit it, there is a part of me that is looking forward to the idea of being alone with him again, just like before. But I still didn't want to let that happen, not after everything.

I grab the papers just to make it look like I have something to do, as I stand up quickly. "I will get the rest of the details sorted out for you," I look down at the desk, hoping my tone will end this meeting. "I will send the final results to your office."

Lucien takes off his suit jacket, rolls his sleeves up, and leans forward against the table. "Why not we finish it now?"

His gaze meets mine, pinning me down and settling on my lips before snapping back to my eyes.

I stand up, turn off the laptop, and carry it in my arms. "Office hours are over."

He stands and pushes off the desk to the side, closing the space between us. "Tell me, Aurora. Do you really want to leave?"

I don't move, even though I want to. My body fails me. I'm frozen in place as his fingers graze my wrist. I have no idea if it's a reminder that he still knows too well how to mend me.

I swallow, my throat clamping. "Lucien," I grimace.

His lips curve in a devious smirk. "Yes, sweetheart?"

My pulse hammers in my ears as I rip my hand away immediately. "You don't get to

call me that."

"You used to like it." His jaw ticks.

"I used to like a lot of things." I take a step back. "But not anymore."

A muscle in his cheek twitches. He doesn't look away. He watches me like he's trying to fit the pieces of me back together, but I won't let him.

I grab my bag, slipping the laptop inside. "We're done here."

I take a step, but Lucien adjusts, blocking the door.

"On the trip, there is a conference." His voice is soft, but there is nothing soft about the way his eyes pin me down in place. "We need to go. Together. I don't care if you like it or not."

I stiffen, cursing in my thoughts. "Go with someone else from your company."

He smirks, shaking his head. "We are the only ones who can handle this deal. It's just us, Aurora. Like old times."

Memories crash into me when he mentioned old times. Events replay in my mind: the late-night meetings, whispered plans, and his promises that we would build something stronger together. The way he kissed me like I was all that existed in his world.

Even with all of that, he broke me.

I take a step back. "I don't want the old times."

Lucien takes a few steps close to me, tipping my chin up with two fingers as he takes a deep breath, causing mine to hitch.

He brushes his thumb against my jaw, his touch soft and gentle. "You're scared."

I shove his hand off my jaw. "Of you?" I let out a sharp and bitter laugh. "Not in your wildest dreams." I lie through my teeth, hiding the strands of worry of knotting my intestines with a subtle swallow. Running into him in a public restaurant is one thing. Having to work on a project with him is another, but going on business trips with him? That's a completely different level on its own. That's a bit too personal for me, and knowing Lucien, next will be him barging into my house. I can't have that, not when I have to keep him away from Ronan.

A quick scene of him running into Ronan flashes through my mind. Will he know he's his son? Will he feel an instant bond to him, or will the striking resemblance give him away before anything else? The knot in my stomach tightens into a nausea-forming strand, and I immediately dismiss the thought with a shake of my head, returning my focus to the painfully handsome, smirking devil in front of me.

"Then prove it by going on that business trip with me."

I try to hesitate, but damn him, I can't. He knows exactly how to use my pride to fumble me. Also, if I give in now, maybe I can curtail his excess and keep our relationship confined to the four walls of the office. I can control how things progress from here, and there'll be no reason for him to seek me out.

I clench my teeth, rage filling my eyes. "Fine. Strictly business."

His smirk widens, victorious. "Of course."

Big liar.

Without another word, I nudge him out of my way and slam the door closed behind me.

The next day drags on, and every time I glance up from my computer, I find my mind wondering where Lucien is and if he is going to show up today, as he mentioned in the text.

Every inch of me has been charged with erratic nerves since my phone vibrated with a message from him informing me he'd be at the office today to discuss the details of our trip. I almost found myself reluctant to come to work today, but I refuse to be the coward in this situation.

Then again, this is the right time to back down from this because the deeper I get to work with him on this project, the harder it will be for me to escape.

My head jerks up at the sound of a knock on the door. It's Lucien. He doesn't wait for my approval before coming in. He just strides in like it's his office. All he does is push my buttons without saying a word. I try to act normal by keeping the distance between us, but as long as we work together, it will be in my wildest dreams.

"So," Lucien sits across from me, adjusting his navy blue suit, "have you thought of something yet?"

"I have no idea since I didn't bring this up. Whatever you decide on is a good idea," I say, trying to act all nonchalant. "I'm busy right now. We can finalize everything on the trip."

A crooked smile widens on Lucien's face, and I know there's something strange about his approval. A knot suddenly forms in my stomach.

"Good," he taps his fingers on the table. "I'll get everything arranged, and the flight leaves tomorrow morning."

I nod, avoiding the urge to stare at him as I focus on my computer.

Immediately when I get home that night, I pack for the trip while trying to focus on the job at hand. I calm myself down by telling myself it's just business we are going for, and I will not tolerate any crossed boundaries.

I can handle this, and I will keep my distance from Lucien. But deep down, I know that Lucien will always be watching me. There is never a time when he isn't. And something tells me that I won't be able to escape him this time.

It's either that this plane is small or that Lucien is too big. It has to be one of them. I'm so uncomfortable that I keep shifting as Lucien settles his entire weight beside me.

His thighs keep brushing mine even though we are in a first-class-level seat that is big enough to make a person comfortable without inconveniencing the other.

I have no idea how the heat from Lucien's body seeps from his body and gets into mine. He's just overly too close to me.

I want to tell him to stay in proper position, but I wasn't ready for an argument. So, I try to focus on my laptop, but Lucien stretches his arm and drops it at the back of my seat, on my shoulder.

He knows exactly what he's doing.

"Aurora, you've got to relax," he murmurs. "You're overthinking things."

I tilted my head, glaring at him. "I wonder why."

Lucien chuckles. "Because you know exactly what you are walking into. You just don't have a choice."

I snap my laptop shut. I hate that he's doing this to me. "You never can tell if you're also walking into your grave."

His eyes dart to my lips, swallowing hard. "I don't mind."

I hate him. I hate that he looks at me like that. I hate that my body remembers how it once felt being with him, the heat of his body on mine and his breath against my skin.

And lastly, I hate that, deep down inside me, the part between my legs still wants to be touched and eaten.

"Unlike you, I don't find the idea of a grave intriguing, so I'd appreciate it if you sit properly and quit talking to me." "You haven't tried it with me," his voice is barely a whisper, and I would've missed his response if he wasn't encroaching on my personal space. "I raise a questioning brow at him. "Sorry?" He offers me a lopsided smile. "The grave, I was saying you'll have a great time if I'm there with you."

I stare at him like he just sprouted a second head while he maintains that stupid smile on his face.

"First, you practically forced me into a work trip, and now you want to kill me?"

"What I'm saying is, I'm confident I'll have a good time anywhere so long as you're with me." His voice grows impossibly lower, and my breath follows. "I just need you

to give me the chance to show you."

His eyes are filled with unspoken promises, and I can make out a flicker of hope lurking behind them. He seizes the moment to draw closer to me, and the air in our suite is suddenly too heavy to draw into my lungs. My skin tingles with anticipation as his eyes trail from my eyes to my neck before resting on the pendant resting on my neck. I feel the piece of metal heat up beneath his burning gaze, and I fight the urge to tear it from my neck and toss it to the side. Lucien doesn't make any more moves, but his eyes might as well be hands caressing every bit of me and leaving a wanton flame wherever they touch. He hadn't even touched me, yet I felt ravaged. I quickly turn away, breaking the spell and turning my attention to the world around me. Promises. The same ones he couldn't uphold five years ago. The same ones I held on to and tailored my life around to be tossed to the side like a rag doll. The same ones that left a gaping hole in my chest. I am not the young, naive girl I was, and despite a foolish part of me wanting to dive into his arms and let him whisper sweet nothings to me, I know better.

The after-effect is worse than a hangover of the tenth degree and takes an even longer time to get rid of or, in my case, manage. I glue my attention to the clouds floating by while the side of my face burns with awareness of Lucien's unwavering gaze. I don't offer him a word of reply, nor do I turn to confront him. Eventually, I feel the heat slip away, and the pressure lifts off my shoulders. What I did not expect is the slight pang of disappointment that came from not being the object of his sole focus. Lucien doesn't give up easily. Maybe he finally got the message, or maybe he remembered he had the entirety of the trip to get his point across. Whatever it is, I guess I'll have to rely on time to find out. The realization leaves me with a deeper feeling of unease.

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Lucien

The conference room is filled with hums from the sound of paper shuffling and laptops. The final details of the project are laid out. I sit back in my chair, feeling the eyes of people on me. Executives from every department sit at the long table, their faces a mix of skepticism and interest, all waiting for a decision, all waiting for me to push them in the direction I want. My eyes scan across the room, searching for Aurora. Then, my eyes fall on her. She sits poised across me, but there's a palpable wall between us now.

Ever since we landed at the airport, she has been treating me like some stranger. I try not to show it, but I can't ignore whatever it is. She's treating this like it's just another thing she does whenever she feels like, and I can't help feeling like she's slipping away from my grasp.

She's not like the others who are here. Not like the mindless sycophants who throw praise at me every time I speak. She is different. She doesn't fawn over me and doesn't care for my reputation or charm. Her eyes remain fixed on the projector, on the problem at hand, and not on me...it drives me crazy.

I clench my jaw tightly, adjusting my tie. All this feels so new to me. She is not the Aurora I remember.

Aurora has always looked at me and wants to see me. Even when she was angry, even in silence, she never ignored me. But now? All she does is act like I'm nothing but a business partner who brought her on a trip to further our project. I lean back in my chair, grasping my pen tightly and tapping it against the table. The financial team

continues to talk about the risks and market variables, but my focus is just locked on her.

I don't care if she acts differently to me.

There is no hesitation in any movement she makes. Her voice is certain, and when she speaks, people listen. They were probably drawn by her aura.

I watch carefully how she flips through the reports, files, and documents, her brows furrowing, her lips pressing together like she has something to say, but she's holding back.

My eyes trail down the soft curve of her cheek and the slope of her neck as I swallow hard.

All I want right now is to touch her and tame whatever composure she builds for me and make her stare at me the way she has always done in the past.

She hasn't done that in a while, not once since we came in contact again.

A sharp voice cuts through my thoughts, echoing. "Lucien, do you have anything to add?"

I haven't even been listening to whatever they are talking about, so what could I possibly have to add? But then, I need to add something.

I blink, scanning the faces of the executives in the conference room, then clear my throat. Aurora's gaze darts to me for the first time in the meeting. I catch her gaze, but then she looks away.

I hate that she did that.

"We've all been given the points and numbers. I have a new plan, and I'm suggesting that it will take us to the next level. It's hectic, but it's the only way forward." My voice calms as I get everyone's attention. "If we want to dominate the market, we need to take risks. I propose that we double the initial investment. We need to move fast and hard, take the competitors by surprise before they even get the chance to adjust."

Silent whispers fill the conference room as some executives nod in agreement and others frown at it.

I stare at Aurora to see her reaction, but she stays quiet. Her expression is unreadable as her fingers skim the edge of the report in her hand.

Just when I conclude that she has nothing to say, she lifts her head, meeting my gaze.

"I disagree," she spat, her voice calm but challenging.

The executives turn to her. I was surprised by how instantly her words caught the attention of the other members.

Even if I made a wrong suggestion, no one dared to disagree, but Aurora...she's a different breed entirely.

Trying to put off the irritation in my mind, I ask, "You disagree?" "You want to double the investment?" Her eyes lock with mine, unwavering.

I hold her stare, feeling thrown off. "Yes."

She shakes her head and sighs, flipping a page on the report. "What's your risk mitigation plan?"

I cock my head and ignore her question. "Aurora, we don't win by playing safe." She hums, then, she takes a deep breath and pushes the reports towards me. "We also don't win by being reckless."

My lips twitch, as I hold back words. There she is...Aurora. She's a woman I once let go of because I thought she was fragile.

"Why not talk to us about your plan..." I pause and scan the room. "or you don't have any?"

Aurora straightens her back, "I don't speak without having a plan of my own." She shot back at me and stood, walking to the projector and turning her attention to the room. "Mr. Ravenclaw, your plan is very aggressive. The market now isn't stable enough for a bold move like this. If we rush in, and it backfires, we'll lose millions."

She points at the market chart displayed by the projector.

Some executives nod, murmuring their agreement. I watch her as she disagrees with every point I make.

She continues, flipping to another page in the report. "A better approach is a staggered investment. We need to test the water first, then push forward when we have a stronger footing. We build dominance bit by bit. We don't get it by chasing it blindly."

That fire in her—it burns in her voice as she speaks. Now, she stares at me, probably wanting to know my opinion or to have my approval.

Despite that, she now owns the conference room, and I can't lie about that.

A member of the senior executives clears his throat. "Ms. St Claire, you made a valid

point." We all applaud her as he turns his attention to everyone in the room. "Her plan minimizes losses while still making sure we are growing in the game."

Another executive nods. "I agree. It's a smarter option than the first."

Their votes start rolling in, and one by one, they all side with her. I'm upset because I just realize what I have lost. I lost her. I follow her eyes as she scans the room as it settles into an agreement.

I watch her in silence, but something twists inside me. It is a mixture of pride and admiration, but deep down, it's regret. How didn't I see this before? How did I let her go without realizing how smart she is?

I was wrong all along, and I lost her to my ignorance.

The meeting wraps up, and the executives shake hands. Soon afterward, the conference room empties out. Lingered by the table, I pretend to go over some reviews and documents. But no, that wasn't why I was there. I watch her as she stands a few feet away from me, packing up her things. Aurora stands by the end of the table, gathering her documents and acting completely unbothered—like she didn't notice I was a couple of chairs away from her. "Good job, Aurora."

She doesn't look up to face me. Instead, she trains her eyes on her phone, tapping away. "Thanks," she replies, her tone very distant.

I lean forward, my voice echoing throughout the room. "You enjoyed that."

She pauses, glancing up. Her lips tilt into something that is not quite a smirk but close. "Enjoyed what?"

I narrow my eyes and cross my arms. "Proving me wrong."

She lets out a soft laugh, shaking her head. "It wasn't about proving you wrong, Lucien. All I did was what would best serve the company."

I know she lied because the look of satisfaction on her face said otherwise. One thing about Aurora is that she always knows exactly what she's doing.

Tucking her phone away, she plops her hips on the edge of the table. At least I've got her attention now. "You should be very grateful to me. I just saved your ass from making a reckless mistake that would have spoiled your name on so many grounds." I stand, pushing my chair back, closing the distance between us. "Did you say grateful?" I muttered. "What are we here for?"

She tilts her head, her eyes boring into mine. "Yes. Grateful, and we are here for business."

I reach out, my fingers grazing her wrist. I could feel her shiver under my touch, no matter how hard she tried to resist it. "Is that all it really is to you?"

She takes a deep breath, eyes glittering, but she doesn't move away or say a word. "Isn't it?"

"You've changed, Aurora," I lean closer to her, so close that she could feel the heat of my words in her ear.

She presses her lips together. "Things happen, and it changes people."

My grip tightens around her wrist as I hover over her. "You changed overnight."

Her eyes stayed on me for a long time, like she was searching for the words to say. Then, she forcefully pulls her wrist free.

"Some of us don't have a choice," she cursed and walked away.

Leaving me standing there. I stare at her as she slams the door behind her, and I drown in everything I never realized I wanted. Not until now.

I am such a dickhead.

Her words cut deep and felt like a blow to my chest. Again, I'm left watching as she increases the distance between us. When I ran into her at the restaurant on that fateful day, I swear my world came to a startling halt. Finding her with a date sent a level of anger through me that I knew I had no business feeling. I was tempted to pull her away from him and shake her till she came to her senses, but something in her eyes told me she wouldn't appreciate it. So, I took the high road, opting for an apology. That didn't work either. So here I am, forcing my way into her life the only way I know how until she finally sees that I'm the one for her. Bet that's why she keeps running from you, the stupid voice in my head taunts, but I pay it no heed. I know I royally fucked up. I feel the guilt eating away at my ankles every time my feet strike the ground. I have the absence of my wolf to prove how desperate I've been without her. But I'm here now, aren't I? My phone buzzes, and I quickly pull it out of my pocket, hoping for a text from Aurora. After a few taps, my inbox reveals a text from Selene asking about my trip, and disappointment washes over me like a cold shower. I send her a quick reply and tuck the device back into my pocket. Aurora hasn't said anything about Selene or asked about my status. Either she doesn't care, or she would prefer to be oblivious to that aspect of my life. I prayed it would be latter because that would mean she still feels something for me. I know it'll eventually come up, but by then, I'll be better prepared to deal with it. For now, I am more concerned with getting that look of nonchalance out of her eyes whenever she looks at me. With that in mind, I pull out my phone and shoot her a quick text.

Aurora, you did well today.

I hit the send button, still staring at the message as it delivers. She comes online and reads the message.

One second, two seconds...no response from her. I force myself not to regret sending the text. If I can't have her undivided attention, I'll find ways to keep me in her mind.

A bitter smile escapes my lips. I never thought there would come a day when I'd be scheming and plotting to get Aurora's attention. I always had her staring starry-eyed at me, her hazel orbs dripping with love and admiration, but now, the best I get is a fleeting glance.

I rub my forehead to ease my stress and put my phone into my pocket. I have important things to do, but all I can do is think about her...her smile...her words...how she spoke up today. Later at night, I lie awake, staring at the ceiling. I've never missed her this much. Every time I close my eyes to sleep, all I see is her face. But she is no longer the girl I used to know, and I have no idea how to say goodbye. Scratch that. I don't want to say goodbye.

The following morning, with dark circles under my eyes, I find myself walking through the building housing the conference. I have dealt with several tough businesswomen in my life, but with Aurora, everything is just different.

I walk into the conference room where the team is gathering for another follow-up meeting. As I enter, I see Aurora, sitting in the second chair to the front, flipping through some reports. Somehow, she looks up as I enter, her expression unreadable. I nod at the rest of the team members, take my seat, and glance at her once more, but she already returned her attention to the papers in front of her. The meeting made progress, but my attention keeps going back to her, and I'm painfully aware of every movement she makes and every glance she casts at the projector. I wonder how she's

so focused. As the meeting wraps up, I stand and walk toward her. We must have a conversation whether she wants it or not. I brought her for this trip, and now, she's ignoring me.

Her eyes are glued to the documents in front of her as she packs up her things.

"Aurora," my voice is calm, though inside, my thoughts are a mess.

She looks up, her face emotionless, and her eyebrow quirks up. "Yes?"

I pause, not sure of what to say to her. I want to tell her that I have been thinking about her and that I regret the way things turned out between us, but I don't do that.

"I will see you around later, alright?"

She props her lips, tilting her head, glaring at me. "Why?"

One thing is that I know better than to think she doesn't feel anything. She is suddenly good at hiding her emotions, but I am not blind, and I can see how her fingers clench the pen on the table.

"We came here together, and ever since, you've been avoiding—"

"I'm busy," she cuts me off. "I don't have time for this."

"Sit," I say, nodding toward the chair beside her. She sits, her back straight, but refuses to look at me. "What do you want, Lucien?" she asks, like she doesn't know why I want to talk to her.

"You know why we are here. I'm not just for business. You know that." I hate that I am saying this, but I have to let it off my chest.

She glares at me, her eyes narrowing in irritation. "This again?" Her voice is strained, the kind of strain that comes from months of built-up frustration. "Lucien, I told you before, we are here for business. You've made it clear what you think of me, and I'm not about to let that affect our work."

I swallow hard, and my throat clenches. I want to tell her that she is wrong, but I can't. Aurora stands up and doesn't look at me as she walks past with her handbag hanging over her shoulder, heading for the door. The door clicks shut behind her, and I'm alone again. I wish I could go back to her. I wish she would forgive me and we could do it all over again. But now, I know it's not that simple. I've hurt her, and now, she's left for good.

I hope not because I'd keep trying.

I am slowly growing tired of being hit with her back every time I try.

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Aurora

The sound of music echoes throughout the ballroom, which is filled with laughter and clinking glasses.

Damon's hand holds my waist as we move to the rhythm of the music. His grip is firm, guiding me on the dance floor, and his hot breath brushes against my ear. His cologne is manly and fills my nose as I rest on his arm.

Unlike other people who come in and out of my life, Damon's presence feels comforting, like I can trust him to stay. And yet, despite the comfort I feel, there is something missing. A part of me feels out of place, like I am pretending to be happy, forcing happiness on myself, and I don't like it.

When the conference came to a conclusion, I wasted no time in booking the next flight to Phoenix, and even after that, I made a conscious effort to reduce every interaction with him to quick texts and emails and blocking all of his attempts to see me. I've told myself it's because I can't stand him, and his presence makes me nauseous, but now I am in what is supposed to be my favorite annual event with the man I should be in love with, yet I cannot bring myself to be present and enjoy the night. Maybe it is the expensive lifestyle I see at this ball or the fact that the attention of the guest is on me in a way I am not sure I deserve, but I still can't shake off the feeling that something is wrong. I've felt like this since the first day I ran into Lucien at the restaurant, like I'm at the edge of a cliff and have no idea what could happen in the next minute.

Suddenly, the hairs on the back of my neck rise up. It's that feeling, the one I know

too well. It is one of the signals I get before he graces me with his presence. Lucien is here.

"You're distracted," Damon mutters.

I shake my head, forcing a laugh. "I'm fine."

Damon studies me, but he doesn't press further to question me. Instead, he pulls me closer, fingers tightening around my waist, the heat of his body seeping through my dress. I should feel safe in his arms, but I don't.

I can feel his eyes all over my body, but I don't turn around, and my heartbeat hastens.

Keeping my gaze locked on Damon, I hope silently that my body stays relaxed. I have to pretend that I don't feel him watching me.

Just then, a hand grabs my wrist, clenching tightly. My whole body jerks, a gasp slipping from my lips.

Damon stops moving as his hold on my waist tightens.

"Let her go." His voice is low and dangerous.

Lucien doesn't say anything. His gaze scans my body, and suddenly, it feels like the ballroom blurs away. The music becomes low, and the voices from the crowd become silent. It is just him and me against the world.

"I need to talk to you," he replies, not sparing Damon as much as a glance. Damon's arm around me grows tight as he tugs me closer to him, trying to pull me out of Lucien's hold. "I said, let her go." "And I suggest you stay out of this. If the lady

wants my hands off her, I'm certain she can speak for herself." Lucien's eyes do not leave mine, and I can spot a little audience gathering around us.

"Lady? Damon scoffs. "If this is how you treat women you consider ladies, I wouldn't want to see how you treat the ones you have no regard for." His eyes harden in a way I've never seen before. "Clearly, no one gave you a lesson about respect, but if you don't let go of her this instant, I'll be glad to teach you a thing or two."

The air in the ballroom shifts as the men engage in an intense stare-down, neither of them backing down. Lucien's blue orbs swirl with rage, while Damon's drip with pure animosity. The energy between them is as fragile as a bomb, and I have no doubt it'll take less than a breath from the other to cause full-blown mayhem. I don't know about Damon's fighting abilities. He's always sweet around me, but I've seen Lucien fight, and I know just how ruthless he can be. I'm not sure I want to be responsible for the damage they'll cause.

I open my mouth in an attempt to dissipate the tension, but Lucien beats me to it, his voice dripping with venom. "I don't take lightly to threats. This will be your last warning to stop sniffing around my woman."

"I am not your woman." I waste no time in clarifying, but Lucien merely continues like I didn't say a word. "You'll walk out of here, go play hero somewhere else, and never show your ugly face around here." "Or else what?" Damon takes a step forward. "What could a weakling whose only way of getting attention from a woman is to force himself on her do to me?"

"Both of you, stop this madness," I whisper yell, unable to raise my head to meet the questioning looks from the audience. "What has gotten into you?" My question is directed at Damon. Lucien, I know, does not give two shits about an audience, but Damon, he is always calm and collected, and watching him let Lucien bring out this side of him is a bit disappointing. His gaze softens, and so does his hold around me.

"I'm sorry about that. How about we call this a night and leave? I'll make it up to you, I promise."

"You're not leaving with him, Rora." Lucien's words drop with a tone of finality, and I have no doubt he'll see it to the end. Damon takes a deep breath. "Aurora, you don't have to go with him—"

"It's fine, Damon. I can handle myself."

"You don't have to let him have his way all the time. He relies on your peace-loving nature and hatred for negative attention to keep forcing his way into your life."

I shut my eyes, drawing in a deep breath to steady me. Damon is right. Lucien has been intentionally putting me in difficult situations, but he doesn't know Lucien like I do. His words are not empty threats and promises. He will not back down till I leave this ballroom with him, and I know this organization well enough to understand that if I mess this up so badly, I'll not be invited to subsequent dinners. My client list will take a hit.

I lift a hand, stopping him. "It's fine." I grab the hem of my flowing dress.

Damon stiffens. "Aurora." He takes my hands in his again.

"I said it's fine," I repeat, my voice steady.

My words are sharp, commanding, and louder than I intend. Damon's hand loosens around mine, his fingers clenching into a fist, but he doesn't argue any further. He steps back with a tight-lipped smile visible on his face, bowing lightly. "Of course, Lucien is that guy," his voice laced with anger, ears flaring up. I wish I could explain further, but the situation doesn't offer room for that. Plus, I know Lucien. He won't stop until I give in, and I'm not in the mood to become the hot topic of the finance

industry. Lucien doesn't wait for Damon to leave before his hand reaches for my waist, pulling me closer to him. This time, he isn't asking. His action is the ultimate tool he has.

My breath gets stuck in my throat, and I pull away before my body can take control of me. "What are you doing?" I make no attempt to hide the fury in my voice. He can't keep forcing his way into my life and putting me in difficult situations. "You know exactly what I'm doing, Aurora," Lucien growls, his voice low and raspy. He pulls me, and I basically run beside him toward the corner of the ballroom. The crowd parts like the sea for us. "Lucien," I snap, my pulse hastening. "Stop. I'm not doing this. Not tonight. Not with you."

"I'm not leaving you, Aurora," his grip tightening around my wrist, grasping my shoulder. "Not tonight. Not when we have unfinished business."

I almost believe him because where did that familiar tug in my chest come from? The one that makes my heart ache when I think about what we once had. "I never wanted to hurt you, Aurora," he says, his voice softer now, almost pleading. "You have to believe me. It's not what I intended."

"Then, what did you intend, Lucien?" My voice breaks a little, but I clear my voice, blaming the alcohol thrumming through my veins. I might've gotten carried away by the conversations and had a glass or two above my usual threshold. "What was all of it for? Your marriage? Your lies? Was it all just part of your plan? To disgrace me?"

Lucien's jaw tightens. "I can't believe you came with him?"

I let out a scoff. Of course, he ignores the subject matter and focuses on the one that doesn't serve him.

"That doesn't answer my question, Lucien. What was it all for?"

He pauses, his eyes briefly searching mine before he takes my hand in his and makes for the double doors leading to the balcony.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"You asked me a question, and I intend to answer, but I can't do it here, not with the eyes on us." I seize the moment to scan the room, and true to his words, a greater fraction of the crowd has slowly returned to their business, but I don't miss the nosy ones and their lingering eyes. He leads me up the stairs, and we finally arrive at the rooftop. Once we are away from prying eyes, I yank my hand out of his hold and twirl to face him, holding on to the wall close to me to steady me. Stupid red wine
"What the hell is your problem? Why do you bother so much about my life and who I'm involved with? You left me for another woman!"

He takes a few steps forward, eyes burning fiercely. "You don't belong with Damon."

"I don't belong with you." I shoot back at him.

He flinches, his lips pressing into a thin line. "All these years, I looked for you, Aurora."

I cross my arms. "Didn't look hard enough. If you did, you would have found me because I am right here. I didn't disappear from the earth. How do you expect me to believe this bullshit you're spitting?"

His nostrils flare up. "I never stopped looking, Aurora. There was never a day I didn't search."

I feel the wall I have built around my heart begins to crack. I suddenly feel the urge to

believe him. I want to let him pull me into his arms and erase everything that's happened. But I can't, and I won't.

I hate that I feel like this.

I lift my chin. "That's a bit difficult to believe, seeing as you watched me leave." I know I shouldn't be indulging in this conversation. I should end it here and go home while I still have the time.

My wolf stirs with disapproval. I don't blame her. She only seeks to make sense of why her mate would be so cruel, and her need for an explanation matches my need for clarity.

Lucien exhales, his voice lowering. "My marriage to Selene was never real. It was a political charade...a business deal. You were the only real thing I ever had."

My chest tightens. "I thought I already made it clear I don't need your apologies," I snap. "I don't need you either."

He didn't move.

I want to scream at him and tell him how much he hurt me and how badly he ruined my life. But instead, I turn and walk away from him, stepping out into the other side of the rooftop. I need space to be away from him. I can't think with him so close to me, especially not when my wolf is currently urging me to hear him out.

Tears sting in my eyes. I breathe it in, trying to stop the tears from flowing down. Goddess, I hate how weak this man makes me. I hate how all it takes is one look from him, a brush of the skin, and his breath on my cheeks to rattle the foundations of a wall I spent years building with my tears and pain. I don't need this.

Soon, I hear Lucien's footsteps behind me, but I don't turn around.

"Give me another chance, and I'll make it right. I will. I promise you, Aurora."

I shake my head, my voice barely a whisper. "There's nothing to fix, Lucien."

"I can't lose you again, Aurora." He steps closer, his voice thick with emotion as he wraps his arms around me from behind.

I yank myself free from his arms, wanting to scream at him to leave me alone, to never touch me again. He doesn't have the right to say things like that to me.

"You don't get to do this," I whisper.

Lucien wraps his arms on my shoulder and turns me around. He cups my jaw. "Do what?"

"Mess with me," I hiccup.

He smirks. "I don't have to mess with you, sweetheart." His fingers caress my cheek slowly. "You still feel it, don't you?"

A shiver runs through me, and I grab his wrist, pushing it away. "Don't."

His blue eyes darken. "How long do you think you can hold back or ignore it?"

"I held it back, Lucien," I say, gritting my teeth. "I survived for years."

He exhales, shaking his head. "I'm sorry."

I blink. Lucien never apologizes, but the number of times he has apologized confuses

me. Is it real?

His hands curl into fists. "I'm sorry," his voice is raw. His hand reaches for me, but I step back, my heart pounding in my chest. "I should have fought for you."

I swallow hard.

"You should have, but you didn't fight for me, Lucien," I whisper, shaking my head and fighting back tears. "You left me when I needed you most."

Lucien reaches for his pocket, slips his hand inside, and pulls out an alcohol flask. He always had the habit of carrying a little flask in his suit pocket. We used to joke about how he relies on alcohol to get through painful social gatherings at the pack. He unscrews the lid, tilts it back, and the churning scent of whiskey fills the air.

He swallows hard with his eyes shut and then offers it to me. I shake my head. I already have enough booze running in my veins. An extra sip will be the nail to my coffin. When I don't take the flask, his lips curl into a taunting smile, and he takes another swing, his eyes holding mine. I'm forced to watch as the alcohol rolls down his throat. The grimace on his face, the bob of his Adam's apple, every movement is suddenly magnified and sensual. What are you doing, Aurora?

I clear my throat and try to distract myself with a conversation. "Have you been drinking?"

"Do cocktails count?" "I'm serious, Lucien. If you've been drinking, I don't think we should be having this conversation. You need to go home."

"But I hate his hands on you." He takes a step closer, carelessly discarding his flask to the side. "I hate how his smell still lingers on you. Heck, Rora, I hate the thought of you with another man. I was going to watch and make my move when he left, but his

hands wrapped around your waist in a way only mine should, and I saw you look at him in a way you haven't looked at me in a long time, and I couldn't take it anymore."

Despite being in the open space of the rooftop, I find myself completely devoid of air. Heat that has nothing to do with the wine in my system spreads through me. My throat feels too tight to inhale, and my body itches with awareness.

I urge myself to say something and tell him that so much time has passed and I've moved on, but I can't seem to get the words out. I stand still, swallowing like an anxious prey while he stalks toward me. His every move is clothed in intent. Lucien finally stops in front of me. He has me where he wants me, and I don't stop him. I should stop him. My mind is hazy as my sight blurs out.

His hands wrap around my waist, pulling me closer to him. "Aurora," he breathes on my face, opening my eyes.

I hate him so much, but my body remembers the feeling. His lips crash against mine, claiming me and exploring my mouth with his scorching tongue. I cock my head, responding to his intense kisses as his tongue slips in and out of my mouth. A sharp gasp leaves me, "Mmmph!" but I don't pull away.

The tears I try to hold back stream down my face, and Lucien pulls away, wiping my tears with his thumb.

"I'm here now." He places soft, wet kisses down to my neck and chest.

All the years of yearning, longing, and anger collide, and I clutch his shirt, pulling him closer and harder.

Lucien groans, his voice dominating and raw, his hands sliding down, grabbing my thighs as he lifts me up, and I wrap my legs around him.

Through the soft illumination of the silver of light slipping into the space, I catch a glimpse of his eyes, dark and dripping with so much lust I'm forced to avert my gaze. I'm certain if I look in the mirror, I'd be mirroring his look.

He twirls around, and my back hits the cold stone wall as his mouth devours everywhere: my lips, eyes, nose, forehead, jaw, throat, and chest.

I arch my waist, heat traveling through me. The whiskey makes it worse, driving me insane. His hands grip my hips, strong and demanding, fingers pressing deep as if he's terrified that I'll slip away.

My body burns, my heartbeat bangs in my ear, and every touch and breath between us is pure fire.

"You're mine," he growls, his voice rough.

I want to protest and tell him that he lost the right to claim me a long time ago. But when his hands slide up my thighs, and he spreads my legs open against the cold wall, my body betrays me, and the wanton moan that slips from my mouth is almost embarrassing.

His mouth crashes back into my mouth, claiming me, his teeth grazing my lower lip like he's punishing and worshiping me at the same time.

"You have no idea, Aurora," he whispers between kisses, his voice shaking in escaping growls. "How much I missed this...I missed you so much."

A moan pools at the back of my throat, but I bite it back, my hands clawing at his shirt, desperately tugging at the buttons. The need to feel his skin on mine nearly driving me insane.

He pulls the fabric over his head, and the fresh air slams on my bare skin and my hardened nipple. As if it wasn't enough, he twirls my dress up, his fingers caressing over my bare thighs before he grabs my ass, lifting me.

I wrap my legs around his waist as his hard is pressed on my aching thighs. I can feel it despite his trousers and my panties.

At this point, I realize how much I need and want him.

His breath shakes as he groans, his forehead pressing against mine. "You're all I have ever wanted," he mumbles. His lips brush my ear, and I shudder.

I squeeze my eyes shut, allowing myself to drown in the moment even though I don't believe him even though he was already inside my soul.

His fingers slide into my wet, soaking, desperate pussy. "Fuck," he gasps, groaning. "You are already wet for me."

A soft whimpering cry escapes from my lips as his fingers tease, circling, pressing the top of my pussy.

I grab his wrist, gasping amidst tears. "Lucien—"

His eyes burn into mine, hungry and ready to devour me. "Tell me to stop," he whispers. "Tell me, and I swear I will, Aurora."

I remain quiet and arch my pussy into his pressing bulge, my body begging for more. And that's all he needs to know. This is obviously the worst idea, but I don't have the luxury of logic and rational thought. All I can focus on is how tightly my pussy was clenching with need for him.

Lucien rips my panties off, the material tearing under his grip, and he shoves his pants down, freeing his cock. The thick length slaps against my thighs, sending a ripple of delicious anticipation through me.

I gasp when I feel him on my pussy folds, rubbing from slit to clit, spreading my wetness all over my pussy, teasing and taunting till my vision blurs with need and my eyes roll to the back of my head.

"Look at me," he demands, his voice hoarse and his jaw clenched so tightly that I couldn't help but think that it might snap.

"I need you," he breathes into my ear. "I fucking need you, Rora." He sounds like a depraved madman, and I'm ashamed to admit the sound of it sends a fresh wave of shivers down my spine, causing my walls to clench rhythmically. Lucien wastes no time in lifting my ass and roughly thrusting into me, pulling a cry of pleasure from my throat. My fingers dig into his shoulders as my body takes all of him. A dull pain stretches my walls as I struggle to adjust to his size. It's been years since I felt this.

Lucien groans, his head falling to my shoulder as he runs his finger into my hair. "Fuck, you're so fucking tight."

He relaxes at first, not moving as he just buries his full length inside me, giving me time to adjust to him.

"Say my name," he growls.

I shudder, and short gasps escape from my lips. "Lucien."

"Again." "Luc—" The rest of his name blends into a breathy moan as he begins to move inside me. Slow and steady at first, dragging himself all the way out before pumping back in, deeper and harder. My body tightens and clenches, needing more

with every deep thrust as he grips my thighs, spreading me wider than I can take, his pumping growing faster and rougher. He groans. "You're mine, Aurora. You belong to no one else but me and me alone."

I claw at his back, helping by lifting my hips to contain his thrusts. "You...will...let...me...go...again," I pant, each word interrupting by the slap of our skin on each other.

Lucien growls. "Over my dead body." He seals his promise with a hard thrust, driving me deeper against the wall.

His hand slides between us, his fingers finding my swollen clit and rubbing circles along with his hard thrusts.

My vision blurs as I clench my teeth, and my muscles tighten down there. I could feel it. I'm so close, and he knows it.

He presses his forehead against mine, claiming my lips again. "I love you so much," he whispers, his voice broken as he slams into me so hard and deep that I feel his length in my stomach.

My nails rake down his back as I shatter, and it explodes, my body convulsing around him.

Lucien curses as his grip on my hips tightens, burying himself deep. "Au...ro...raaaa!" he groans, my name escaping as he erupts inside me.

We remain in that position, panting and trembling, as we stay tangled up in each other's arms.

Aurora

I wake up to the sunlight pouring through my bedroom window. I have no memory of how I got here. My last conscious memory is of me laying in Lucien's arms on the rooftop while his fingers stroked my hair. I pull the sheets tighter around me to eliminate the phantom touch ghosting my skin, but it doesn't help. I can still feel him, his hands on my skin, the smell of him on my palm, and his breath against my neck. It lingered on my skin, in my hair, and somehow got into my sheets, causing my stomach to churn. His voice whispered things I refuse to remember because why did I let that happen in the first place?

I squeeze my eyes shut, not allowing any of it to make sense to me. But the memories flash through my mind, his hands on my body, his mouth claiming my lips, the way he worships me...the way I let him have me as he pleases.

My nails dig into my palms. It is all a mistake, one I should've stopped but let happen.

My eyes lock on the ceiling above me as I try to ignore the itch in my fingers urging me to reach for my phone. But I know that doing so will only pull me back into his world, the world where I don't want to belong anymore.

Even after everything that happened last night, I know one thing for sure, and it is that I can't forgive him...Never.

I shove the sheets off me and stand, wrapping my robe tight around my body. My legs feel weak. My skin is too sensitive. My thoughts are too loud, and every move I

make reminds me of how he stretched me out. My doorbell rings, and I clasp my hand over my chest, steadying my erratic heartbeat. I am not expecting anyone, but something tells me I know exactly what I'll find behind the door.

Curiosity and its distant cousin, foolishness, take my hand once again and lead me to the door, forcing my fingers on the doorknob and pulling it open despite confirming the face behind it and having all the reasons not to let him in.

Lucien leans against the door frame, his hands in his pockets, his eyes locked onto mine. My heart slams against my ribs at the sight of him.

He looks like he hasn't slept because his tie is loose and his hair is a little messy as if he has spent the night restless or in a club. I wonder if last night broke him just as much as it broke me.

"Aurora," his voice rough.

I grip the knob tighter. "You need to leave."

His jaw tightens, staring at me like he really needs to have a conversation with me, but I am done with him. "We need to talk."

"There's nothing to talk about." I steal a glance over my shoulders. In no time, Ronan will be up and skipping around the house. Every moment he spends here spells extra problems for me.

"After what happened last night?" His gaze darkens. "I do not believe that."

I push the door trying to shut him out because I wasn't ready to exchange words with him. But he catches the door with his hand and stops me.

"You can't just pretend last night didn't happen," he insists.

I let out a sharp and bitter laugh. "Watch me act like it never happened."

Lucien steps closer, his presence too consuming. "It wasn't just sex, Aurora. We made love."

I feel the heat rise to my cheeks, causing it to blush and my breath turn shallow.

I shake my head. "I'm sorry, but that's all it was to me. A one-night stand. You should know how this world works. Good music, nice food, great alcohol, and you have the perfect recipe for sex. Don't be naive."

The lie burns as it slips from my tongue, but I'd rather be a liar than let him see how much he's affecting me.

His hand tightens on the door frame. "Then look me in the eye and say you felt nothing. How can you call the love we shared a one-night stand, Aurora?"

I open my mouth, but no words come out.

Lucien exhales, his voice softening. "I don't care about what you think because I love you."

My stomach knots at his words. I keep telling him that he has no right to say that word to me. "You don't love me, Lucien," I whisper. "You love the idea of me—the die-hard lover you let go of."

His expression hardens. "I won't let that happen again."

I swallow. This isn't what I want to hear. Shaking my head, I take a step back. "You

already lost me, Lucien." Then I slam the door in his face.

I walk straight into the shower and have the longest bath I have ever had in my entire life. Scrubbing my skin hard in hopes of washing off every mark from him and every smell. I don't belong to him, and I never will.

Immediately after I put on my dress, a knock on the door grabs my attention. Feeling more confident than I did earlier, I walk over and open it to give Lucien a piece of my mind, but I find Damon instead. I've been buried deep in a Lucien Ravenclaw-sized pit. I totally forgot about Damon and how I left things between us. I swallow the disappointment clogging my throat and force a polite smile.

"Hey, I was worried I might wake you up." His voice is gentle, the kind that always makes me feel safe.

"It's alright. I've been up for a while." Sitting up and rubbing my face, I slump onto the couch, trying to shake off the memories and emotions that still swirl inside me.

Damon hands over a cup of coffee to me. "I thought you might need this."

I nod, reaching for the mug. "Thanks," I mutter, my voice barely above a whisper. I want to tell him everything about last night, about Lucien and how I feel, but somehow I feel like I shouldn't. Damon doesn't know the full story, and I'm not sure I'm ready to settle down to tell him all of that.

"How are you holding up?" Damon asks, sitting down next to me. "I'm fine." I force a smile that barely reaches my eyes. "I'm just very tired."

He gives me a knowing look. "You don't have to hide it from me. Aurora, I know you're still struggling with Lucien."

I freeze at the mention of his name. Lucien. My mind reels, and I feel that old anger that I lock up stir inside me. "I'm not hiding anything," I reply quickly, maybe a little too quickly. "I'm just... trying to move on from him. I just need to focus on me right now and not allow anything that will make me remember what happened between us."

Damon watches me for a long moment, his brow furrowed. He knows I'm lying, but there is nothing he can do about it.

"I understand. You're letting him get to you." His voice is soft. "But if you need someone to talk to, or if you want a distraction, I'm here. You know that, right?"

"I'm not." I meet his gaze, "Thank you, Damon. I'll keep that in mind." I run a finger along the rim of my cup, staring down at the swirling liquid, sipping from the mug.

"You don't have to let him control you," he insists. "You have a life outside of him. Focus on that."

I take a slow breath as Damon watches me for a moment, then leans back. "Come with me and Ronan today. Let's clear up your head."

I hesitate. Lucien's presence still lingers like a shadow in my mind. Damon is right. I need to take in fresh air.

"Alright."

Later that day, the park is bright and full of children's laughter. Ronan runs ahead, his small legs moving fast and his laughter carefree, like this world is an easy place to live in.

Damon and I walk behind him as we enter a little café. It is usually crowded with

people, and today isn't an exception.

We settle at a table in the corner. Our conversation merges with the chatter and laughter from other customers, with the soft clink of cutlery against their plates.

But as we talk, I couldn't help but feel a flicker of something nagging at me. It is this same feeling of being watched. The hairs on the back of my neck stand up, and my body reaction is always right about it. I push the thought aside, telling myself that I am being paranoid and there's no way he'd show up here. Just when I wave it off and stare at Damon, the door to the cafe shoots open.

I have no idea why my eyes dart to the entrance of the cafe, my pulse quickens and my stomach churns as soon as my eyes land on him.

What is Lucien doing here?

I quickly look away so he doesn't get to see me here. My eyes meet with Damon's, and I force a smile, hoping he doesn't look back in the direction where Lucien is. Damon must have noticed my sudden stillness because he looked over and then back at me with a confused expression. "Aurora? You okay?" he asks, and I nod.

"Aurora." Lucien's voice is fierce, his hands in his pockets as he walks up to me. His gaze is locked on me.

Right now, I don't want to pretend anymore, as sudden anger flares through me. Damon gazes at me. "Did you tell him where we are?" Resting his arm on the table, he glares at Lucien.

"No, I didn't," I say almost immediately because there's no reason for me to do that, especially now. I didn't want to set my eyes on him.

I couldn't take my eyes off Lucien. My breath hitches in my chest as he stands there, right in front of us, as if he'd been aware of where I'd be. I feel more like he'd been watching me.

And I know, deep down, that he had been following me. I just turned him down, yet he still didn't want to give up. It felt infuriating. Like how dare he do that? After everything, after how he walked away without a second thought, after how he treated me like I was a piece of garbage, how dare he just show up like this in front of our son? I have no idea why he feels like everything that occurs between us could just be swept under the rug like he could walk back into my life without any consequence.

Lucien has been following me, and I hate it.

Before I could stop myself, my voice was sharp, cutting through the air. "What are you doing here, Lucien?" I hissed.

He didn't flinch, his gaze steady, slipping his hand inside his pocket. "I'm trying to see you," his tone was too calm like he hadn't just shown up uninvited. I stand up, making my way toward him. My movement might look like I am going to confront him, but in truth, I am only using my body as a shield to keep him away from spotting Ronan. More than his appearance rattled me. Ronan's presence unsettles me more. The both of them in the space spells disaster, and if I play my cards right, maybe I can distract him from noticing the boy or at least take this confrontation outside.

Lucien tilts his head. "Nice day for a walk, isn't it?"

I clench my fists, feeling disgust. "You're following me."

Lucien shrugs, resting his weight on the pillar beside him. "You're hard to stay away from."

Lucien stepped closer. His presence has crazy powers over me, and my heart skips a beat. I hate that I still felt this pull to him, even after everything he had put me through and after all I did to forget him. "Lucien," I snapped, "What part of 'let me be' don't you understand?"

"You think I'm just going to let you walk away, Aurora?" His voice was dangerous, and it sent a chill down my spine. "You think I need that excuse to leave you alone?"

"You don't get to decide that," Damon shot back. "You don't get to follow her around, showing up whenever you feel like it. You don't get to come into her life like you did nothing to her in the past. Grow up, Lucien."

I stare at Damon as the words feel like knives leaving his mouth, but they are true. Lucien has no rights whatsoever.

"This is none of your business," Lucien clenches his fist. "If you're going to stick around, then do it quietly and never try to interfere in our affairs."

"I never wanted to hurt—" "Stop it," I interrupt, holding my hand up to stop him. "Just stop. I don't want to hear it."

I didn't want to hear it again. I couldn't count how many times he had said that to me.

He turns to Damon, his gaze sharp as he tries to mask the fury still swirling inside him. "You ended things with me," his voice tight. "To be with him."

"That's none of your business, Lucien!" I warn.

"It is! You are mine, and you can't be seen with another dickhead like him!"

"And you're not a dickhead? I'm guessing somewhere in this self-righteous quest of

yours, you see yourself as some prince charming. News flash, Lucien. You're the villain, and no one wants you here. Leave now."

"Mama," Ronan's voice cuts through the tension, and both my head and Lucien's snap to him at the same time. Lucien's eyes widen while mine fills with fear. I should've left him at home with his nanny or left him to play with kids his age. Fuck. Panic sucks the air out of my lungs as Lucien's eyes move from Ronan to me. He doesn't look surprised, but I can spot the question lurking behind them. "We have the same eyes," Ronan exclaims with so much excitement, pointing at Lucien. In that single moment, I watch as the very fabric that holds my life together snaps, and my world comes crashing down.

Lucien

The room seems to come to a halt as I stand there. My unwavering gaze is on the boy, not more than five, who is smiling up at me. From the color of his eyes, the curve of his jaw to the all-familiar mischievous glint in his gaze, everything seems familiar. It is like looking at a younger version of myself, and I can't shake the feeling that tugs at my insides.

"We have the same eyes!" He exclaims, stating the obvious, his smile widening. I blink, my mind a buzz of thoughts. Surely, if Aurora and I have a child, a son for that matter, she would've let me know.

I look up just then, meeting her gaze. The question in my eyes is all too obvious. But before I can process my observations, Aurora's voice cuts through the thick silence.

"Ronan, sweetie, why don't you and Damon give me a head start? I'll catch up in a minute." Her words seem to tumble out in a rush. She's nervous. I can tell by how she's fiddling with the handle of her clutch bag, something she does when she's anxious. It's a habit I had, on multiple occasions, made fun of when we were together. "Go on, you two," she shoos, her voice a little too loud and forced, "I'll...I'll catch up with you soon."

I feel a growl rising in my throat as I watch Damon swiftly lift the boy off his feet, twirling him around, eliciting giggles of delight. His laughter fills the air, momentarily easing the tension that has been circling us. A wave of jealousy surges through me, unbidden and irrational. It is a feeling I cannot fully explain, a perfect blend of possessiveness, a primal need to protect him, and something else, something

deeper. We lock eyes briefly as she straightens her dress, taking a few polite steps toward me. "Is that..." I trail off, unable to spit out the question weighing on my heart.

She raises a brow, curiosity lining her features. "Is that his father? No, not at all. Damon and I haven't been together that long."

I shake my head, "That's not my question, Rora." I look up this time, holding her gaze as firmly as I can. "Is that my son?" I bury my now trembling hands deep within my pockets, far away from her eyes. I weave through my memory, putting the timeline together to see if there is even the slightest possibility that I have a son.

A warmth licks its way down my spine as I entertain the thought of being a father. Maybe this is what I have always wanted. But that feeling is quickly squashed by the realization that she has kept him away from me.

My anger bubbles, causing me to clench my hidden fists. Her eyes widen slightly, a flicker of what I read as guilt surfacing before she laughs, a forced cackle, "Don't be ridiculous, Lucien."

But I see it—the way her eyes dart to the ground and the brief pause before she forces a smile back onto her face. All of that raises questions in my mind. Besides, if my calculations are correct, Ronan seems to have been conceived around the time Aurora and I were still sneaking around.

"Did you keep him away from me all this time?" I ask, my voice higher than I intend.

Her expression is blank as she stares at me, shaking her head as if the mere assumption of it was beneath her, and she was not going to indulge me by providing answers. I struggle to rein in my emotions, not wanting to cause a scene, especially not here. She did not deserve that.

"I'd need you to give me direct answers for this," I reply, my face void of any emotion that could suggest anything other than seriousness to her. She turns to me. Her smile is gone, and in its place is a coldness I have come to know, "You don't get to stand there and demand answers from me, not anymore."

Her words hurt me. I can tell she knows that, but she doesn't seem to care in the slightest bit. Or at least, she's trying not to. I run my fingers through the strands of my hair, tucking loose strands away carefully, a silent attempt to steady myself. "Rora, this is important. I need to know the truth."

She scoffs, "You want the truth?" Her voice is breaking, but she doesn't seem to care. "Ronan is the result of a one-night stand I had with some human after I left the pack!"

Her reply catches me off guard because this is miles away from what I was expecting to hear. A one-night stand? Really? A now familiar jealousy skitters down my spine once again, settling in the pit of my stomach, but I don't believe her. The Aurora I know is not one to hop into bed with just anyone.

"You? A one-night stand? We both know you're not one to move like that."

She let out a humorless chuckle. "Try being told you're not enough by your mate and his father offering you money to stay away and then you can come back and tell me what you think I am capable of and what I am and what I am not. It's been years, Lucien, and you know nothing of the woman I've become or the things I had to go through to become her."

Her eyes are dripping with so much anger and contempt I feel my heart sink with disappointment. Until now, I did not realize just how much I had wished him to be my son. Her hand wraps protectively around her small frame as she continues, "He's my son, mine! He's the reason I managed to get through all those years after your betrayal! So, don't come in here making silly assumptions, Lucien."

The pair of eyes that stare back at me are fierce, and for a moment, I feel the weight of her wrath. I stand there, unable to say anymore. It's a good thing she's not done speaking because I was completely blank.

"That, right there," she gestures towards an unsuspecting Damon and the boy who are laughing about something, "is the closest thing to family I have, and I will not let you destroy it." A single tear makes its way down her face, causing my heart to squeeze with pain.

Hearing her call them her family fills me with fresh rage. That should be us, not him, I think to myself. But this isn't the time to bring that up. Guilt washes over me, a sensation that I'm starting to get used to. I have no right to throw accusations like this at her, none whatsoever. "Rora...I'm sorry. I just...." I trail off for a moment, "I need to know. You, of all people, should understand that."

The thought of having a son for a moment was satisfying, and having that taken away hurt me in a way. Despite the striking resemblance, he's not mine. Accepting that is the hard part because even though it was for only a second, the possibility of me being his father had filled me with an unusual hope. I wanted so desperately to bond with him and guide him through life's challenges, as my father never did for me. I wanted to raise him in ways I wasn't. And I can't deny the other side of me that glowed with the possibility of a life with Rora. A child would definitely tilt things in my favor.

"I don't need you to be sorry. I need you to leave us alone." I bite back on my bottom lip, "I can't do that, not when I just found you."

"I wasn't asking, Lucien. I am telling you. This has gone on far longer than it should. End it." She turns to leave just then but pauses after a few steps, spinning back as if suddenly remembering something important, "Also, stop following me!" Her words float about me, echoing with a finality that leaves little room for argument. I say

nothing as I watch her walk away, a smile forming on her face as she bends to plant a kiss on her son's forehead. He smiles back at her, his eyes wandering in my direction briefly before he looks away. I watch, heart heavy, as I let myself wonder if this is the life we would've shared if I had just stood up for her.

I wait for them to be completely out of sight before I leave. There was no need to redo any of this unpleasantness.

Looking down at the leather strap watch on my wrist, I let out a small sigh. It's a little past noon, and if I'm going to make it to the meeting of pack elders, I better get going—now.

I settle into my car, slamming the doors a little louder than is necessary as I make the drive back to the pack. The drive back is silent as I am lost in thoughts, my mind still struggling to comprehend everything. I force the car to a halt once I arrive home, letting my gaze sweep the compound. There are a few cars around, clear evidence of the elder's presence.

I recline further in my seat, running my hand through my hair as I sigh. It's about to be an even longer day, I think to myself as I make to exit the car.

I breeze through the house, making my way into the large room we have always reserved for meetings like these. As my eyes scan the faces present, I notice almost everyone is seated. Sneaking a quick glance at my watch, I clear my throat, "Gentlemen, thank you for making it down here just in time."

Turning to Liam, who is seated to my right, I continue, "Any news so far?"

"Nothing substantial yet, but we all have our ears to the ground," he says almost instantly. There's something in his eyes that makes me doubt his reply, but I say nothing, not right now, at least.

I nod absently, my mind drifting to the last time we registered an attack from our enemies.

"If I may?" A voice says, and I turn, nodding in its direction, "Go on," I say, my sudden interest masking my previous distraction. "Your mate, Selene," he pauses, as though the rest of the sentence would come to me by some sort of divine intervention.

I raise a brow, "What about her?"

He holds my gaze as he answers, "Even a child can sense the lack of chemistry between you two." A few men at the table grunt approvingly, their outbursts causing him to go on. "We're at war. This is the time to put up a united front, as we cannot afford to look weak in any way before our enemies." "Are you telling me how to run my home?" I shoot back, irritation evident in my voice.

"I'm merely saying a child will present a united front and hope of some sort to the pack. Five years without a child is not a good look, especially with the circumstances plaguing us.

Before I can respond, another man picks up from where he just left off. "In the last few weeks, we have suffered minor attacks, some of which might not seem as much, but we know what's coming." He pauses to look around briefly, as if seeking the approval of everyone present. "This is an obvious attempt of the Silver Pack to weaken us so they can pounce." I recline further into my seat, a budding headache pressing against my temples, "I'm already looking into it." "Fortifying our defenses has always been a priority. We'll see how much more we can do." Liam says, coming to my aid just in time. The first man shakes his head, "It's more than that." He looks up at me, and for a moment, I can tell I am not going to enjoy listening to his line of thoughts.

"We wonder if you're the right person to lead us, especially at a time of war like this."

His gaze lowers to his open palm as though something interesting has just landed on it. "The strength of a pack lies in the abilities of their alpha. We cannot afford to be..."

"I assure you, there is nothing to be concerned about. Everything is in place to ensure the safety of the people, and so far, it seems to be working." "I have no doubt you have everything in place. Your father was one of the best alphas across the community, and I would expect he taught you all that is necessary." He takes a brief pause, his voice growing more suggestive. "Our interests lie in a slightly different topic." "I already know what this is about. I have a good mind to shut it down at this point and dismiss the meeting, but that'll only encourage them to come stronger. So, I give him a gentle nod to go ahead. "Like I said," he continued. "Your father taught you a lot, hence our faith in you. The people are worried there's no one for you to pass on your knowledge to, hence the fear of an uncertain future." A few nods and grunts of approval follow his words, giving him the confidence to continue and the courage to grow bolder. I don't interrupt.

What's better than letting a snake grow to its full length before cutting it?

I pause to look around, "Thank you once again for coming, this session is dismissed."

"Simply put, we're wondering when you and the Luna will give us an heir." Silence washes over the room as all eyes turn to me, eager, anticipating, and waiting. I let a few minutes pass just in case someone feels extra passionate and has something new to add. "Is that all?" I ask when no one says anything.

A few murmurs scatter through the room before another man echos a "yes" to a different person supplying the answer. It was a collective decision. I tuck the observation into my pocket and return my attention to them.

"I believe children come at their own time, and I'll not appreciate anyone putting my

wife under the undue pressure to produce an heir. When the time is right, the Goddess will bless Blackwood with an heir. And if you have further arguments, take it up with nature," I add, sending the man who looks like he is gearing up to make a speech a silencing look.

"This will be the last time any of you will bring my family to the table to be discussed and probed. I will not stand for it."

"The situation with the alpha's family is always a subject of general pack concern," the first man points out. I have to dig my knuckles into my palms to keep my anger in check.

"Yes, it is, only when the situation is a hundred percent within my control."

Without missing a beat, he shoots back. "Are you saying you and the Luna are not capable of producing an heir?"

A deathly silence falls over the room the moment the words drop from his mouth, and I can see in his eyes that he just realized he had made a huge mistake. I level him with the most domineering and intense gaze I can muster. He takes a few steps back as if he can feel the heat from my eyes. "This will be the last time any of you will raise this issue to my hearing. Not even in passing, and if I should hear any level of disrespect towards my wife, I'll make sure the culprit never gets the chance to say another word in their life." I take a deep breath, letting my gaze sweep through the room, lingering on each face. "Am I clear?"

"There's also the issue of your missing wolf and the security of the pack," a strong voice rings from the back. The silence that descends upon the court is almost palpable.

"If you would like to question my ability to protect my pack, you should be bold

enough to show your face." I knew this day would come. I've been hearing little murmurs here and there. I didn't think any of them would be foolish enough to bring it up like this, but I never back down from a good challenge.

An older man with greying hair steps out of the gathering. "An alpha without his wolf is an impending danger. The least you can do is give the people an heir to look forward to." His voice is firm, and there's no sign of fear in his eyes. He's from one of those pure-blood families that have taken it upon themselves to stand for the interest of the pack.

I raise a brow at him after a brief assessment. "And how has my wolf's absence negatively impacted the pack?"

He opens his mouth to respond, but I don't give him the chance. If there's one thing I learned from my father, it's to never give your enemy an opening to manifest their strengths.

"As far as I know, my beta here ensures me they're patrolling at the border at all times. My wife, a capable Luna, has taken to training some women to defend themselves. Kids are able to go to school and return safely. Everyone is safe within the border, so what exactly do you speak of?"

He is wise not to give a reply, but I don't miss the angry tick on his lower jaw. I waste no time in dismissing the gathering before I am forced to make an example of one of them. As they shuffle out of the room, whispers echo around us. We sit in silence, Liam and I, as we watch each one of them. Once the last one was out the door, I turned to him, "Seriously, what is new?" He shakes his head, "The casualties this time are too many. We're keeping it low-key, but this is bound to come out soon." He looks like he wants to say more, probably asking how I felt about the confrontation, but decided against it. I'm grateful for his reluctance to bring this up in front of all of them, but still, I feel my chest tighten. The intention of the first elder was obvious. He

wanted to shed extra light on the nature of my marriage with Selene while punching holes into my abilities.

I might not know the situation with my wolf. In the past five years, the healers have not been able to come up with a sustainable solution, only that he went away as a result of intense pain and desire to dissociate from me. Did I mention that the condition is equally a very rare one, and the best I can do is wait?Regardless, I'll not let some old man walk into my court and question my marriage and ability. I'll die before I see the day that happens. This is not the time for this. I already have pack elders questioning my ability to rule them, and now more bad news looms over us. I take a deep breath, my mind racing for a solution.I need to come up with something quickly. News like this is the shovel they need to bury me.

Aurora

I trail my fingers lightly over my son's face, watching him sleep. For years, it has been just us until Damon came into our lives. My mind drifts randomly to my run-in with Lucien earlier, and I sigh. The knots in my stomach tighten their grip and the warmth that usually accompanies the memories of him fill me. A warmth creeps up my thigh, a vivid reminder of our night on the rooftop. I shut my eyes, willing the thoughts away as I lean in to plant a kiss on Ronan's forehead.

I watch him a while longer before getting to my feet and heading out, making sure to leave the door slightly open. Now alone, my mind wanders for the umpteenth time to Lucien, and as I tuck away loose strands of hair behind my ears, I wonder how much of a mistake the night on the balcony was.

I had let myself give in to a moment of weakness, and the worst part is that, a part of me enjoyed it. But despite all of that, deep down, I know the depth of the hurt I have nursed all these years. I don't know how long I can deny my wolf the comfortable intimacy that comes from a mate. I collapse on my bed with a heavy sigh, searching blindly for my phone and knocking down a bedside lamp.

A low grunt of frustration slips from my mouth as I struggle to set it back in place, examining it briefly for any damage. There's none, as far as I can tell.

I turn my attention to my phone once again, scrolling through my contacts until I find Katherine's number.

I stare at it as it rings, my fingers toying with a lock of hair, a nervous habit of mine.

When I found out Katherine, a human being, was mated to a shifter, and she accepted the bond, I was a little too excited to let her know I am part of the community. A human friend, who I could tell everything about the shifter world to without having to filter out the details really did wonders for my healing journey, and it helped me with moving on. We've come to trust each other for the most personal things without the need for secrets. She answers, although on the second ring, "Heyyy."

"I'm such a mess," I say almost immediately, rolling over to lay on my back.

"Is something wrong?" Her voice comes again, a hint of concern lacing her tone.

"I slept with Lucien." I find myself blurting out, then almost immediately, I feel the need to add, "I don't know what I was thinking, honestly."

The line is silent for a while, and the silence eats away at my conscience. I'm about to call out her name when her voice floats through the receiver again. "Okay..." she hesitates a moment, her voice calm and void of judgment, "And Damon?"

I sigh again, "I like him, I really do. I'm just so confused. I don't want my son to get caught up in the middle of anything."

"What do you want?" she asks, her voice taking a serious tone now. I reach out and grab a pillow, tucking it between my legs and then resting my head on another, "From them or life in general?"

Katherine's low chuckle eases some of the tension I am feeling, "Okay, that was too vague. What do you want from them?"

Her rephrase of the question doesn't make it easier to answer. So, as I stare at the ceiling, my uncertainty as thick as a fog, I realize just how much I have been running away from providing answers to this very question. "I don't know." My voice is barely

a whisper now, but she doesn't seem to mind.

"Rora," she begins, "I think you do." There's a small pause where I assume she's letting me wonder what she means before she continues. "You know what you want, or in this case, who you want. Deciding to remain unsure is your body's way of avoiding making a decision. You've been hurt before, and now you don't trust yourself enough to make the right choice."

I run a hand through the strands of my hair, letting her words sink in. "What if I honestly don't actually know? What if I'm stuck between them? Then what?" I hold my breath, steeling myself in preparation for her response. She sighs, and I can sense the smile in her voice, "Then, you follow your heart."

I roll my eyes at her response. How typical. Of course, she'll ask me to follow my heart. She followed hers all the way to Europe and is currently having the time of her life. "Been there, done that, didn't end up well enough."

Katherine let out a low chuckle. "How did I know you were going to say that? Tell you what?" she says, and I can mentally picture her swinging over her legs and getting into a more comfortable position. "How about this time, you just follow your heart? No fate, no divine powers, just you and your gut."

Somehow, what she says makes sense. I know I'm not making a decision right now, but when I'm ready, her words will be the only thing I take into consideration. "Thank you," I reply finally, a small smile tugging at the sides of my face.

"Anytime." We talk briefly about our day before hanging up. I place my phone face down, my fingers drawing circles on my exposed stomach with the words "Then follow your heart" ringing in my head until I drift into a quiet sleep.

The beeping of my alarm startles me awake, and I stir, grunting in displeasure as I search blindly for the device and turn it off. Forcing myself to a sitting position, I yawn, blowing locks of hair away from my face. My routine for this morning is easy. Get Ronan ready for the day and prepare to head to work.

I breeze through it, humming a tune as I prepare breakfast and rub a bath. I make a miniature list for grocery shopping later in the day as the fridge is almost empty. Once he's clean and all dressed up, I focus on myself, putting on clothes already chosen the night before. I pause before the grand mirror, doing a fit check, and when I'm content, I head out with Ronan.

Ronan wanted to walk today—something about his teacher telling him to soak up the morning sun—and I decided to indulge him. The walk down to his school was a short one, and we chatted for the entirety of the way. He rambled about his friends, not pausing until we arrived at our destination.

I lower myself to his height, squatting so I can look him in the eye. "Try to keep out of trouble today," I say, ruffling his hair lightly.

He laughs, a calming sound that warms me up from the inside out. I place his bag carefully over both shoulders, and my heart warms with emotions as I savor the moment. "Bye, Mama!" he yells, waving at me, his excitement obvious as I steal one last hug before letting him disappear with the rest of the students. I watch him mingle with the others, the warmth of their innocence radiating off of them. When I am certain he's inside, I stand, straighten my outfit, and move my purse to my right hand. I pause to check the time, smiling when I realize I have more than enough time to get to work early. I make my way in the opposite direction from his school, heading down the familiar streets with my smile still intact. I mentally go over what I am to do at work, making mental notes of important things as I head further down.

The weight of decisions from the previous day looms, drawing a low sigh from me. I

pull out my phone, typing a text to Lucien but deciding against it almost as soon as I get past the first sentence. There's still so much I haven't figured out, especially about him. I hate how much of an effect he still has on me, but I can only blame that on the fact that we are mates, and there's no getting around that. I draw in a breath, letting it go after a while. I cannot begin the day like this. I shake my head lightly as if physically trying to shake away thoughts of him. A wave of unease washes over me just then, a sensation that only seems to grow as the moments pass. Something is not right. I can feel it, the tingles of a looming discomfort. I turn, my eyes darting about my surroundings. There's nothing unusual as far as my eyes can see, but I cannot seem to shake the unsettling feeling that I am being watched or, worse, followed. I quicken my pace, hoping to shake off the unsettling feeling.

But no matter what, it only seems to linger and grow. I take bold peeks over my shoulders, desperate to ascertain the nature of whatever potential danger is looming. The shadow of a man catches my eye for an instant before it disappears, but his scent lingers. Shifter. I take a wrong turn in an attempt to throw him off my trail, and in that instant, I notice the presence of two others on my tail. I consider shifting, but I am smart enough to know I cannot take on three wolves alone, and as if it's worse that I'm not pure-blood, I'm a woman, too. Each one of them is looking in my direction, barely doing much to conceal their intentions. My pace quickens, a sense of urgency washing over me as my pulse races with newfound worry. I have three men on my tail. The thought of it sends a shiver through my being.

I take yet another turn, desperate to remain in a public space and deprive them of the opportunity of an alley ambush. The men seem to focus only on the task ahead of them: me. Their eyes follow me like a predator watching its prey before the kill. A shudder rocks my being as I clutch my bag firmer, bumping into random strangers but not stopping to offer any sincere apology. A few of them utter curse words out loud, but I don't pause to engage them. I do not have the luxury of time. I turn once more, my gaze shifting between each one of them. I have no idea what they want with me, and I'm not going to slow down long enough to find out either. I've gone five

years without as much as a whiff of a shifter on my tail. The sudden appearance of three is definitely not an invitation to a tea party.

The space between us thins as the minutes go by, and it strikes me just then that I cannot afford to let them catch up. In an instant, I kick off my shoes and run, my hands swinging wildly beside me as I struggle to put as much distance as I can between me and them.

I don't need to turn to know they're hot on my heel, and the realization that I might not be able to outrun them forces goosebumps to the surface of my skin.

My mouth hangs open, hot air pouring out as panic sobs spill out. I have no idea where I'm headed, and soon, I find myself exactly where I never want to be—alone. There's no one as far as I can see. I turn, realizing they are probably a few steps behind. I have less than three seconds to think of my next move, so I duck into the nearest building, locking the door behind me as I struggle with the strap of my bag to pull out my phone.

The building is somewhat spacious, with most of the furniture covered in white sheets. I let my eyes dart about briefly, my hands deep in my purse. The bag lands with a loud thud, and I leave it, running further into the house as a loud bang followed by the sound of something solid crashing into the floor. The urgent taps of heavy footsteps echo behind me.

I dash into another room, my palms sweaty and trembling as I look around for anything I can use as a weapon. Soon, I find myself in a closet, one that, from the amount of dust in it, hasn't been used in years. I unlock my phone after four failed attempts, my hands still shaking uncontrollably. The number on the screen is Lucien's, and without a moment of hesitation, I call him. "Spread out!" A man bellowed, his voice loud and commanding, followed by a clamor of footsteps doing exactly as told. Beads of sweat roll down my face as I press the phone to my ear, my

eyes shut in a silent prayer, "Dear Goddess, please, just for my son," I manage to say. Nothing else makes sense at this point.

Lucien answers after a few painfully long seconds, his voice low and expectant, "Rora?"

I nod, even though he cannot see me, "I'm being followed. Please, please help me." "Where are you?" He asks, the urgency in his voice sending a wave of calm through me, at least for now.

I look around, "I...I don't know exactly, but I took two wrong turns on my way to work in a bid to lose them." My voice is shaky, and my words are almost incoherent. A sob threatens to break free, so I put my palm over my mouth, the sudden movement causing my phone to slip from my already slippery grip.

The noise does not go unnoticed, I realize as I hear someone enter the room.

Jolts of panic shoot through me as I hear the door creak open and a pair of heavy feet enter the room, moving purposefully in my direction.

No other choice, my mind screams as adrenaline courses through my veins and the pounding of my heartbeat fills my ears. The floorboards creak in anticipation, my body trembling as I prepare myself for the inevitable.

This can't possibly be it.

Lucien

A tingle of warmth spreads across my palm as I scan through the documents, trying to catch up on a few days worth of work. The glass of whiskey in front of me is almost empty, and my head keeps throbbing from the mental workload and numbers I have dealt with, yet I don't feel halfway done. If anything, the files seem to multiply with every passing minute.

I rub my forehead lightly as my eyes wander outside. The sun is up now, signaling the start of a new day. A small yawn escapes from me, a testament to my sleepless night. My hand finds its way back to the glass, pouring the rest of its content down my throat. The liquor burns its way down, blurring any traces of sleep. I reach for the bottle, refilling my glass with steady hands. My mind is a maze of thoughts. The last few weeks have been about keeping the peace, or what is left of it.

At our last meeting, the elders highlighted their concerns about my ability to rule them, especially at a time like this. While I cannot blame them for having concerns, I can do with a bit of faith at this point. Losing my wolf is something that has been weighing on me.

My mind wanders to Aurora, and I play with the idea of calling her. I stare at my phone, my mind deciding against it at the last moment. The timely buzz of my phone alarm forces my head back up, and as I reach for the device, my face contorts into a light frown. It's almost time for the strategy meeting. With the growing threat from Silver Pack and their reckless brutality to smaller packs, a strong wave of restlessness has blown across the pack and left everyone anxious and constantly looking over their shoulders. A meeting like this will give them the confidence that the leaders are

doing something about the situation and ease the panic in their hearts while enabling us to come up with the best way to deal with the situation. A promise I made to myself while I was in training was to never let bloodshed be my first line of action. I put preserving the lives of those entrusted under me over mindless ego battles and dick-swinging contests, but I never back down from unleashing anarchy when necessary. Silver Pack has had the absence of my wolf to thank for the air in their lungs for the longest time. It's getting to the point where I have to remind them why Blackwood possesses the power it does. With one final look at the desk, I pick up my phone and head towards the door, tucking the device away as I pull the door open and almost bumping into a distressed-looking Liam. "Good, you're headed out already. So, I assume you've heard?"

My chest tightens with dread, especially because of the sense of urgency radiating off of him, "What terrible news have you brought?"

A rough sound emanates from the back of his throat. I feel my shoulders instantly grow tense.

There was an attack at the east border earlier with no casualties. I think it was merely a ploy to rattle the people or distract us from something bigger, but the elders are not having it. They've already gathered in the courtroom, and most of them are very agitated. I run my fingers through my hair, tugging the strands in frustration. The fears of the women and children I can understand, but these grown men, most of whom are retired warriors and hold crucial pack positions, are nauseating. Everyone who has ever brushed past combat knows that creating distress in the enemy camp is one of the easiest ways to instill disunity and destabilize them, giving you the edge to launch an unsuspected attack. Yet they allow these things to get to them. "Let's go." I hurry off in the direction of the courtroom with Liam in tow. I arrive to a chaotic environment of elders screaming at each other. A few of them still had some brain cells left and urged the others to stay calm while the goons amongst them spread lies and tears like confetti. At the sight of me, some of them begin to lower their voices

and return to their seats. Fucking cowards. "Good afternoon, gentlemen," I greet, moving to my position at the head of the table and lowering myself into my seat. Liam sits at my right.

"Alpha," they greet in return.

"The news of the attack has gotten to me," I say, letting my eyes sweep across their faces. There are a few older men and some younger ones representing their fathers. "While we can clearly witness the growing audacity of Silver Pack, I believe we've not become too shortsighted to see through their childish games."

A transient noise of scattered murmurs and shuffling feet sweeps through the room. Some of them look away while others swallow thickly. I continue.

"What I'll not tolerate at a time like this is my best heads bickering about nonsense and unable to hold their emotions in and do what needs to be done. This is supposed to be an important strategizing meeting, and you let a ruckus destabilize you so fast? Where do you expect the kids and women to draw their strength?"

I give a minute for the words to settle and let anyone speak their mind. When nothing happens, I gesture for Liam to pull out the maps.

"There's a pattern to the attacks from Silver Pack," Liam starts, pointing at one of the spots marked 'x'. "This is the last point of attack, and by my prediction, their next point should not be very far from the perimeter."

"If you pay attention, you'll see there's been no direct hit to us, but they're forming a slow circle around our borders, taking over the smaller packs around us." He pauses, letting his words sink before drawing a line connecting all the points of attack. "They're encircling us."

I stare at the semicircle formed by Liam's line, filtering out the murmurs around me. I had my suspicions about their attack. Take over the areas surrounding Blackwood, then close in on us." I say we unite the warriors of the smaller packs that are yet to be affected and strike back." A young warrior says, the vein in his forehead dangerously close to popping, the classic displace of youthful bloodlust.

"I would assume they'll be expecting something similar from us and are prepared for that. I propose we take a more surprising line of action." The older man beside him replies.

"Like what?" The question raises a cacophony of voices airing their opinions at the same time.

My phone chooses this moment to ring, almost startling me. The caller has me more concerned. I move to the corner of the room to keep the noise from interfering.

"Rora?" I ask the moment I answer, my voice mirroring my emotions. It's more than a surprise she's calling, especially this early.

The voice that greets me from the other end of the line is far from what I am expecting. It's her, but I have this strange feeling that something is wrong.

"I'm being followed. Please, please help me," she says, her voice a distorted whisper. I was right. I hate to be right about things like this.

"Where are you?" I ask, listening closely for any sound in the background that can hint at her location, anything that can help. There's nothing, only silence from her end, and I take that to mean that she's off the street, probably hiding somewhere. It's a terrible thing to do, but I cannot fault her, not right now. She pauses as if trying to decide, "I...I don't know exactly, but I took two wrong turns on my way to work in a bid to lose them." I draw a mental map, trying to see where I can place her. "Aurora,

try...." I am still speaking when I hear a loud thud, followed swiftly by the shuffling of feet.

"Aurora? Aurora?" I repeat, feeling my heart sink to my stomach when I'm met with no response.

I dial her number, but this time, it doesn't go through.

I try again, pacing back and forth, and this time it rings, but no answer comes. I end the call, tucking the device away. I hurry to the table to find them still arguing and Liam trying to get his point across. The problem with a gathering of male wolves who have both strength and social standing is to get them to calm down and listen to one another. Everyone thinks their opinion is superior, but that is the least of my problems. I grab my car keys from the table, turning every head in my direction. "Is everything alright?" Liam asks. The room quiets down, and all eyes are on me. The meeting is of great importance, and if anything, the attack earlier signifies just how important it is that we come up with something. Liam and I have also put a lot of work into gathering the details and marking out the maps. "There's an urgent situation I need to attend to," I reply, tucking the key into my pocket. "Liam will remain here in my absence to guide you through the meetings and strategies we've put together." "Is this about the pack? Is there another attack?" the younger warrior from earlier asks, visibly gearing for a fight. My fingers curl into a fist. Aurora's scared voice has been on a loop in my head since the call ended, and I have neither liberty nor time to explain myself to anyone. All eyes turn to me following his question. Not that I blame them. What could be more important than pack business? What could possibly make an alpha leave a war strategizing meeting when his pack is practically on fire?

"This is not about the pack, but it holds as much importance. Like I said, Liam will guide you through the rest of the meeting in my absence, and I'll try to be back as soon as I can."

"It's hardly ideal to leave a meeting as important as this, alpha, especially for something that has nothing to do with the pack." "I think the elders are right," Selene says, her voice marginally softer than the male brawls. "Can't the situation wait? We're almost at a point of emergency."

My gaze shifts to the clock on the wall. Three minutes. That's how long I've been going back and forth with them. Liam doesn't say anything, but I don't miss the questions in his eyes. "They have you and Liam, and I trust you both to come up with an exquisite plan. This particular emergency, however, requires my presence."

"More than your pack requires your presence?" Selene asks, and I suck in a deep breath, toying with the idea of just walking away without an explanation. It's not like they'll stop me. I turn to Liam. "Take care of everything," I say before hurrying out of the room, pulling out my phone from my pocket. Aurora is in Phoenix, and that is at least forty-five minutes away from Blackwood. I'll never get to her on time, but the PI I hired to look into everything about her can.

"It's Aurora," I say immediately the line connects. "She's in danger, and I have no idea where she is. I need you to find her right now and keep her safe." I hear the fast taps of fingers on the keyboard, and he requests the details of her movement and where she was last seen.

"She said something about being followed and taking two wrong turns on her way to work. Find the people after her and how they found her, and get back to me immediately, whatever it takes." My heart is beating at an impossible speed, and I can almost hear the heavy thuds in my ears as I turn on the ignition, pulling my car out of the lot and blasting my horn all the way till I get to the main road. On a normal day, I'd be very conscious of the speed I drive, but right now, my safety is the last thing on my mind. I check my phone to see if the PI has reached out. I try calling Aurora again, but this time, the phone is switched off. Fear tightens my throat, and I squeeze the gears, stepping on the gas to accelerate my speed. "Shit!" I step on the brake,

jerking the car to a stop and observing the scene ahead of me. A roadblock. There's a truck in the middle of the road and another next to it. It appears to have been an accident, and a few bystanders have gathered at the scene. "Fuck." I let out a long line of curses. I restart the car, trying to find a way around the accident, but everywhere seems to be blocked, and the road back will add an extra hour to my journey. I don't have the time for that. I fling the door open and bolt onto the street, breaking into a sprint the moment my feet hit the pavement. I weave through the wreckage, hoping to find a taxi in record time. Thankfully, my phone pings with details of Aurora's location. I push my limbs into a full-blown run. I don't see the man coming for me till he tackles me, a sharp pain cutting into my thigh. An uninhibited growl escapes me, and I quickly flip us over, snatching the blade from him and driving it into his heart. The trees lining the sides of the road shield us from public view. I glance around to find another two others heading towards me, and I hurriedly pull myself from the corner of the road. They're both werewolves, and if my guess is correct, they're from Silver Pack. With my bleeding thigh and very absent wolf, I'll be no match for the two men heading toward me, but if I'm in the open, they can't engage. They'd be breaking the very laws binding the supernatural world and risking exposure. There's a taxi on the other side of the road, and I waste no time flagging it down and crapping out the address. The taxi driver gives me a weird look but seals his lips when I pull out a few wads of cash, unlocking the door and letting me in. The pain in my thigh grows more insistent, drawing a sharp hiss from me as I move to adjust my posture in the car. I carefully inspect the injury. It's a deep one with rough edges. It's not bad enough to require a surgical intervention, but it's not healing. There's not even a mere contraction of the skin. It has managed to stop bleeding profusely, but the injury remains fresh. "How far are we?" "Not more than ten minutes away," he replies, and I curse underneath my breath. "Can you drive faster?" The man gives me a weird look through the mirror, and I return with a straight face. "Can I buy the car then?"

His eyes almost double in size. "I know you wouldn't want to break traffic rules, but I have a life-or-death emergency, and I can't afford to care about traffic rules right now. If you're good, I can wire you the money right now. I don't mind paying double." He

doesn't give me a reply, but he steps on the gas, moving at a speed that's less than I would have, but much faster than he was moving. I catch a glimpse of the time on the digital clock. It's been almost thirty minutes since I left Blackwood. I lost my phone during the attack, so I have no feedback from the PI. I swallow the thick lump of fear forming in my throat and will myself to stay clear-headed. The PI texted minutes ago, so he must've gotten to her. She's safe, I say to myself. She's safe. There's no cause for alarm. I don't believe it, but I hold on to it. It's much better than imagining anything happening to her. I won't survive it.

Aurora

The door to the closet yanks open, and the familiar face of one of the men following me peeks in. A sinister grin spread through his lips at the sight of me. He wastes no time in reaching for me.

I yell, scratching him as best I can, my hands flying in every direction as I scream my lungs out in the hope that someone, anyone, would come to my aid. He laughs, a deep cackle that sends a wave of fear down my spine, "No one can hear you, sweetheart. Don't make this more difficult for yourself." He leans in further, "I don't want to have to hurt you more than I ought to."

The closet seems to grow smaller, threatening to close me inside of it. I draw in deep breaths, desperate to stay calm. In that moment, my mind drifts to Ronan, my heart twisting with regret as I wonder why I did not hug him tighter the last time I saw him.

The man pulls me by the hair, forcing me to stumble out of the closet just in time to see the other two men walk in.

"A tough one, this one," He says to them, his smile growing wide. "I think we might even have fun with her."

The room, I notice, is small and empty of any trace of furniture, save for a chair that is obviously missing a leg sitting in a corner. The air is thick with dust, a constant reminder that this house has not enjoyed the company of guests in a while. I can feel the panic rising within as my hand trembles. The need to say a prayer is overwhelming, but I wonder how timely the response will be. He turns back to me, his

eyes narrowing menacingly, and he takes my chin between his fingers, forcing me to look into his eyes, "Now, now, sweetheart, don't be too hard on yourself. There's no need for that."

There's a hint of cigarettes and cheap whiskey on his breath, the foul combination causing my stomach to churn in disgust. "Let go of me!" I yell, my scalp burning as I struggle against his grip.

I can tell he's the leader from his demeanor and the way the other two cower before him. They stand around, eyes on me, as they smile at something I cannot relate to. He shakes his head lightly, the sickening look not leaving his eyes. "I can't do that, not after going through all that trouble to find you."

"I promise, I'm not the person you're looking for. I don't make trouble. I mind my business. I'm not even important," I argue, trying to make him reason with me. I honestly cannot, for the life of me, come up with a reason why anyone would invest so much strength into finding me. I lived in a cottage at the end of my pack and was barely noticed, for fucks sake.

The man only manages a smile, making him appear creepier than he already is. "Someone must've thought differently, but tell you what," a sick glint in his eyes intensifies as his eyes rake all over me, his grip on my hair growing impossibly tighter. "If you make us really happy, we might trade favors. What do you say?"

I spit in his face, the action causing him to pull back suddenly in disgust, but that is not before he slaps me hard across the face, forcing my head to snap to the left.

With one hand, he shoves me to the ground, and I crawl into a corner. He swings his leg in my direction, missing me by a few inches. That alone seems to agitate him more as he stares down at me. His smile is gone, and in its place is a cold, emotionless scowl. "You bitch!" I taste blood, but I don't mind, "I assure you,

someone will notice my absence and come for me." I try to sound convincing despite not believing a word I say, but the man must've seen right through my bluff.

He laughs, his index pointing at me as he says, more to the men than to me, "Oh, she thinks Lucien is running down here to save his damsel in distress." More laughter erupts in the room, causing me to shift uncomfortably as I wrap my hands around my knees, trying to find some comfort despite my circumstances. He knows Lucien? So, this isn't a random ambush?

Surely, after my message, Lucien will come for me. I have no idea why he's the one I called, but that doesn't matter. All I want is to get away from this as soon as I possibly can.

"He has important business to attend to, things more important than the likes of you. I made sure of that," the man says, still grinning, although it seems somewhat forced now. His eyes are still gleaming with malicious intent. I press my back further back, leaning heavily against the wall as I struggle to accept my fate, a weight of fear and anxiety weighing down on me.

A loud noise cuts through the air, causing my eyes to fly open. The man lets his gun down, turning to the others, "Check that out."

But there's almost no need for that as a figure walks into the room just then, his eyes scanning the room briefly until they rest on me.

"Damon!" I call, my chest light with relief. Before he can answer me, the two men rush towards him.

I gasp, attempting just then to run to him, but I'm pulled back by a firm grip around my wrist, "Not so fast, love." The man says again, and I turn just in time to see the butt end of his gun colliding with my temple before everything fades to darkness.

The next time my eyes flutter open, there's someone towering above me. "Lucien..?" I call, but my voice only comes out a weak, throaty whisper.

He shakes his head just as my sight clears from the blurry mess my vision became upon awakening.

"It's Damon," he says, reaching down to grasp my hand, giving it a gentle squeeze as I look up at him. I try to sit upright, but my body is too weak to support me. My legs feel numb, and the pounding in my head only seems to intensify. "How did you find me here?" I ask simply, wincing slightly at the throbbing sensation that radiates from my skull. He leans closer, examining my temple, "Careful now. Don't do too much just yet. You have a nasty cut up here."

I look around just then, seeing no trace of the men, not even Lucien. A wave of pain envelopes me, squeezing me tight as the realization dawns on me. I called him in a time of danger. I had imagined his delay to be a result of not knowing my exact location, but the words of the vile man with the gun repeated in my head, "He has important business to attend to, things more important than the likes of you." He wasn't late. He just didn't bother enough to show up. I sigh sadly and close my eyes as I allow my head to drop backward. A wave of disappointment washes over me, making me curl forward slightly. My disappointment is more at myself for expecting anything different from him. I should've known better. I mutter to myself inaudibly.

"What happened?" I ask, my eyes sweeping the room briefly before settling on his face. His eyes follow mine briefly as if trying to ascertain what I'm asking, "They're gone now. You have nothing to worry about," he says simply. He leans forward to give my forehead a slight kiss, a hint of relief and concern lining his features.

"Aurora?" A familiar voice calls, causing the both of us to turn toward the door. A

sigh escapes my mouth as I see Lucien, and I feel my breath hitch. He's here, but even though I want to draw some sort of comfort from that, the fact that I wouldn't be here right now if not for Damon hinders that. "You're okay," he says, crossing over to where I am sitting and taking my hand in his. I notice then that his clothes are torn in a few places, a number of his buttons undone, exposing more of his collarbone than what would normally be acceptable, and his shirt wrinkled as though he had thrown it on quickly.

His eyes are dark as if he hasn't slept a wink in days. I want to reach out to him and ask if he's okay, but my anger suggests differently.

I shrug him aside, turning instead to Damon, "Can you help me up?" He offers a quick nod before helping me to my feet carefully, as though I am fragile.

I let my weight rest on him as I move to exit, paying no attention to Lucien who is still bent, his eyes on me.

"I'm sorry, really, something came up just as I was heading here," Lucien says, the apologetic tone raising a bubble of rage within me. He gets to his feet and straightens his posture, his eyes never leaving mine. "It's always something with you, always. And every single time you make your choice, it's never me," my chest tightens as I speak, the feeling overwhelming as tears begin to fill my eyes, but I don't let them fall. I refuse to waste them on him.

His eyes soften as the guilt consumes him fully, his lips parting as he reaches for me.

I step backward, wiping angrily at my eyes with the back of my hand. "You shouldn't be here. Forget I called," I say, taking another step back as he stands frozen, his hands held helplessly to his sides, his shoulders slumped.

I'm covered in dust, I notice, but that is the least of my current concerns. "Aurora,

please, just listen to me," he begins, closing the space between us. "There was another attack. I tried to come as soon as possible..." his voice trails off, a hint of sadness obvious in his tone.

As if taking my silence as an invitation to go on, he continues, "Please, I didn't abandon you. I hurried here the moment I got an opportunity."

My eyes soften, and the wave of rage within me is seemingly calmer. Although I understand his dilemma, I cannot bring myself to accept it right now.

I shake my head violently, "You just never change..." I say softly, unable to finish my sentence. I can feel my heart breaking under the weight of my words.

I can't help but feel this is a repeat of five years ago. Last time, he chose his position over me, and now, he chose pack business over my life. Nothing will ever make up for this.

"It isn't the same..." he says, trying to follow me, but I shake my head firmly, stopping him in his tracks.

"I want you to stay away, Lucien. I mean it this time." He stares at me for a long moment, watching me silently as if trying to ascertain my seriousness as my tears continue to fall. Finally, he lowers his gaze, his chin dipping in defeat.

Turning to Damon, "Please, let's get out of here." He wraps his arm around my shoulders, supporting me with his weight as he leads us out of the building. "Rora..." I hear Lucien begin, his hand reaching for my arm, but I turn away, not stopping or turning to acknowledge him, not even caring enough to hear his last words.

Lucien

I remember the sound of my ragged breathing and the feel of the cold floor beneath me as I crumpled to the ground. My world narrows to a single, searing point: pain.

Aurora's voice replays nonstop in my head. The pain in it is all too obvious as her words pierce further into my heart. My fingers tremble slightly, and I place them face down on the floor, letting the cold seep into them in the hope it will grant me some sort of calm.

I remember that look in her eyes, an unmistakable depth of pain. It's not the first time I've seen it. It was there five years ago. It's there now. A wave of pain shoots through me. I hate how much I have hurt her and blame myself, although there is almost nothing I can do to ease her anger. Her voice bellows in my head, "It's just like it was five years ago. There'll always be something more important to you, always, and I'm tired of letting myself get hurt." A grunt escapes my parting lips as I struggle to steel myself against the wave of emotions swirling within me, threatening to burst out and overwhelm me. I think back to all those years ago, a part of me wishing I could've had the courage to make better choices, the kind that wouldn't push the woman I love further away from my reach. But I'm not the man I was years back.

As alpha, the burden of the pack is mine to bear, and I have long made peace with its inconveniences. But when Aurora is in the mix, my judgment blurs, and the only thing that keeps me grounded to my duty is a low voice of reasoning, a voice that was barely audible beneath fear that hit me when she called. I left everything for her.

I still cannot shake off the weight of her gaze. I remember her eyes lighting up with a

familiar affection when she saw me walk in, but that was quick to fade, and in its place, some sort of anger resided, the type born of constant disappointment. She hates me, and rightly so. No one should have to go through betrayal this many times. One would think that without my wolf, my bond with her is weaker, but that is not the case. Like magnets, I am constantly gravitating toward her, unable to stop myself from feeling the weight of jealousy whenever Damon is around her.

I wonder how he knew to find her there. Did she call him before me? Or am I her first option? The latter should explain her disappointment, but I still cannot be too sure.

But when I think back to how frantic her voice was over the phone, I find myself slightly grateful he was able to get here without me. I don't want to imagine what would've happened if I was too late.

Three men, fucking three men against one woman. She wouldn't have stood a chance. Was this a random hit, or was she targeted? But why would anyone target her? She's just Aurora, plain and simple—my thoughts halt at that point. She is no longer the simple girl in the cottage at the end of the park. She is now the COO of one of the biggest finance firms I know, and once in the corporate world, there's no telling who has placed a target on your back and why. Still, I can't shake off the suspicion gnawing at me. First, Blackwood is attacked. Then Rora is attacked, and on my way to her, I'm ambushed. I'm not superstitious by any means, but I am a businessman, and more than anything, I understand statistics, probability, and coincidences, and this ranks very low on my list of natural occurrences. But on the other hand, no one knows about the connection between Rora and me. No one would think of using her to get to me. So, what is the common denominator that ties all of these together?

A small sigh escapes my lips, and I give my head a little shake to dissipate the thoughts, clustering into a throbbing headache on my forehead.

Although my entire being is saying otherwise, I know I have to respect her wishes

and take a step back. I cannot push her to leave again. I know how long it took to find her the last time that mistake was made. A sharp pain flares in my thigh, jolting me out of my reverie. I wince lightly, ripping the blood-stained fabric of my pants to reveal a deep wound, one I sustained during the attack not too long ago.

The metallic smell of blood stays suspended in the air like a cologne, and I stare at the open cut, tracing my fingers lightly over the deep lines. I wince lightly, the cut pulsing with blood. I trace the obvious lines a wolf's claw caused, relief washing through me as I remember he didn't live long enough to bask in the glory of hurting me.

The combination of the pain from the injury and blood loss almost caused me to black out, but I had to pick every shred of strength in me to fight my way out and make it to Rora.

Without my wolf, my healing process is slower, and now, it will take longer than usual to completely heal. A wave of nausea washes over me, a testament to the amount of blood I'm losing. I tip more of the fabric, letting it stretch out just enough to tie around the cut.

A smile of satisfaction settles on my lips as I stare down at my handiwork, hoping this is enough to keep me alive long enough to get the help I need. I might have to limp for a while, only until I heal completely. Aurora didn't notice the limp in my strides earlier, and I'm thankful for that. Not that it matters, but I didn't want to explain why I wasn't healing. Liam had tried to discourage me from going, stating I might be dead before I got to her and how I'd be useless to her in my state, but I couldn't trust anyone with her. Plus, it won't look good on me.

The pain intensifies, forcing my eyes down as I grip a part of my leg, grunting audibly. I'm losing blood, too much of it, and I need to get help.

With both hands supporting my weight, I struggle to get myself on my feet, my bloody hands leaving fine imprints wherever they touch. "Aren't you a sight for sore eyes?" Liam says a look of concern twinkling in his eyes as he studies me, pushing the door open further.

I laugh despite myself. Of course, he found a way to follow me. "This is the happiest I've been to see you."

"Can't say the same for you." He inclines his head at the blood and leftover evidence of struggle on the floor. "What happened?"

"How did you find me?" I dodge the question with one of my own. As grateful as I am to see him, I don't recall giving anyone details of my movements.

He hesitates for a beat. His gaze sweeps through the warehouse and back at me before releasing a sigh of defeat. He knows I won't be offering details. "Shortly after you left, the meeting turned into a full-blown cock contest. Everyone wanted to feel important. Selene was quick to diffuse the tension, and we came up with a temporary solution pending your return."

I raise a brow at him. "Temporary?" The situation is hardly ideal for temporary commitments. We're at risk of being surrounded.

"A unanimous agreement couldn't be reached in your absence," he replied, taking a lazy step into the building. "Anyway, I got news of a roadblock and an attack. The scouts on the border went to check it out, and your car was found at the scene alongside blood trails and your phone. I followed the address in it."

The P.I. was so engrossed in everything unfolding before me I missed his absence at the scene. He sent me the address. He should be here somewhere.

"Did you see anyone on your way in? A car or something," I ask, hoping that by some magic, he sent me the address the moment he got it, and I arrived before him. The pressure of being the cause of another death almost squeezes the air from my lungs.

Liam's eyes narrow slightly. "I didn't pay much attention to the surroundings, but I recall seeing a black BMW close to the spot I parked."

I nod, struggling to get on my feet and failing again. An empty BMW in a place like this. Doesn't take a genius to piece it together.

Liam is immediately next to me, supporting my weight with his body. "Are you going to tell me what was so urgent you had to leave a strategy meeting for and why the hell you're wounded in an abandoned warehouse?"

I grit my teeth, channeling my strength into getting on my feet. A vital rule is to never keep secrets from your beta, but when your beta is your mate's brother, the situation becomes a little more complicated.

He nods, walking over, "That's one nasty son of a bitch..." his voice trails off as he studies the injury. When will it heal?

"Pack healer, get me there."

With a swift nod, he helps pull me to my feet, placing most of my weight on himself as we walk side by side out the door, my hand swinging over his shoulders.

I grunt, hopping on my good leg and letting the other one hang in the air, not wanting to stress it any further. We make our way out, with me leaving a trail of blood.

A wave of gratitude washes over me as we step out of the building, and I notice a car

parked right in front. He settles me into the front seat, securing the seat belt before turning to settle in his own seat.

I recline as far as I'm allowed, my head relaxing against the headrest as I sigh. I turn towards him, "Thank you." I manage to say, my gratitude obvious in my tone.

He nods, shrugging it lightly, "It's nothing you wouldn't do for any one of us."

Trust. The thought of it tightens my chest. That's what our pack is built on—trust. They know I cannot let them down. They trust me that much, and that is why I'm always torn when it comes to picking between my duty and any other thing I consider important. But today I had no choice. I couldn't leave the woman I love in danger to strategize wars. The car comes alive just then, and he drives off, weaving through the traffic of the day. With nothing else to do, I find myself looking out the window, my pain almost a distant memory. We arrive at the pack healer's place in no time, and with a sense of urgency, I am attended to. "You've lost a lot of blood," A voice states, and I nod absently, not bothering to open my eyes.

"We have to treat his wounds and also begin a transfusion. He's lucky to still be here." I feel a needle slide into my vein, but I don't blink. I lay there, listening to the clatter of things in the background, a number of thoughts running through my mind until I drift into a quiet sleep.

****The morning light filters in through the blinds, and I slowly drag myself upright. My mouth is dry, and a familiar ache in my head lingers behind my eyes, making it heavy. I notice just then that I am home and in the comfort of my bedroom. The room is dark, save for a few rays of sunlight seeping in slowly. Selene walks in with a steaming mug of what smells like coffee in her hand. Her eyes widen in surprise when she finds me.

"You're awake!" she squeals, drawing a small smile from me. I notice that her phone

is going off non-stop with message notifications.

"How long was I out?" I ask, wincing from the painful protest on my thigh as I try to sit up. I feel exhaustion seeping into my bones, even though I'm just opening my eyes.

"Only a couple of hours," she says. Then, as if noticing my slight discomfort, she adds, "Can I get you anything?"

I nod, "Yes, please. Water should be fine." "Coming right up!" she announces as she leans closer to place the mug on the table before dashing out of the room.

I sigh, picking up a pillow and setting it up behind me to support my position, leaning back again and closing my eyes as I release a sigh. The warmth of my bed is welcoming, the softness lulling me further into slumber. A content smile plays across my lips as I hum a low tune. The thought of being alive is enough to put me in a good mood. I have no plans for today—not in my condition. Thoughts of Aurora invade the peace I'm starting to get used to, causing my chest to tighten with the familiar pangs of regret. I wonder if she's injured and if she's completely healed by now, as I remember the nasty cut on the side of her temples. I remember raking my eyes over her, looking to see if she had any more injuries. Nothing stood out except the one on her temples. I play with the idea of calling, just to make sure. But her words from yesterday are yet to cool. She doesn't want me to contact her, not ever, and with the way things went down with us the last time, it would be hardly ideal for me to barge into her life without giving her some time to heal.

The doors swing open just then, and Selene returns. This time, there's a glass of water firm between her grip. "Here," she says, handing it to me, a hint of worry creeping over her features. "How are you feeling?"

For the first time since I woke up, a genuine smile crosses my face as I take the glass,

drinking rapidly. It is evident in my voice when I reply, "Better already."

She nods, her lips parting as though she is about to say more, but the loud pinging of her phone interrupts. "Sorry," she says, an apologetic smile on her face as she unlocks the device, the warmth of her smile radiating from her as she types furiously.

"New admirer?" I ask, placing the now empty glass on the nightstand and settling back. She almost doesn't hear me.

The smile on her face suddenly drops, and she flips off her phone, her features taut and withdrawn. "It's just a friend, no one important," she says as she tucks the phone into her pocket.

"Your face says something different, though," I counter with a slight raise of my brows.

Her cheeks flush red, and she avoids my gaze, busying herself with the mug of coffee that was just on the nightstand, "Well," she begins, taking a pause too long before continuing, "like I said, just a friend."

I pull myself into a more comfortable position. "You know you can tell me anything, right?" I say, refusing to drop the issue. Usually, I'd let it go after the first time I asked, but something tells me it's no ordinary conversation. Selene is hardly ever secretive. There's a part of me that strongly wants to discover something. Maybe it's the guilt about Aurora. If I discover Selene is seeing someone, as strange as it might be, I'll be relieved. After seconds of fiddling with her thumb, she finally lifts her eyes to meet mine. "I found my fated mate."

"Oh."

She doesn't give me a chance before horridly adding, "It's nothing, though. I was just

carried away by the novelty of actually meeting him after all these years. But it's nothing you need to concern yourself with. I know my duties, and I know where my priorities lie."

"Selene."

"I know I should've told him and cut communications with him, but I just couldn't bring myself to. I've never felt something so intense," her voice dips with a slight tremble.

A smile tugs at my lips. I'm all so familiar with the things she just said: the pull, the connection, the inability to stay away. The first time I saw Rora and the way her face glowed from the reflection of the lights at the ball replayed in my mind like flashes from a vintage movie. Everything about her was so perfect, and I felt tingles spread through me, my fingers itching to swatch away the strand of hair that kept me from seeing her eyes. She was ethereal. If only I didn't have to lose her to realize how much she means to me.

My mind returns to the present and all Selene said. She's sorry. If only she knew the thoughts in my head, if only she knew what I've been up to the past few days, the reason I go to work every day, and the reason I can't bear to touch her. Despite my guilt, a flicker of hope licks at my inside. What are the chances that she would find her mate now of all times if it's not the hands of fate? The Goddess must be really giving me a second chance. "Say something, Luc," she urges, her lips trembling like a kid caught with their hand in the cookie jar. I struggle to find the best way to deal with the situation. Would it be weird if I showed no sign of jealousy? Any husband would be upset about finding out his wife is entertaining another man, but we're not just any couple.

"I'm happy for you, Selene. Not many people are lucky enough to find what you just received."

She blinks twice, confusion etched to her features. "You're not upset?"

I let out a soft smile. "It does sting a bit, but then we're not exactly the regular couple, are we?"

My admission must've relieved her emotions as she sucks in a deep breath, releasing a shaky laugh with it. "I guess there's that." A brief silence settles between us, and I let it linger for a while before asking. "Do you love him?"

She stalls for a moment, probably debating the answer. "I don't know. I guess?" "Is he good to you?"

A fond smile plays on her lips, and I find myself smiling with her. "He's really kind and gentle. Not something I expected from a warrior alpha."

My brows shoot up at the information while her eyes widen. "A warrior alpha, huh?"

"I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to. This is the first time I'm getting to talk about him, and I don't know—"

"Selene, breathe."

"You're being so calm about this, and it's unsettling me."

I let out a chuckle, toying with the idea of sharing my story with her. "I once found my mate, you know."

"You had a mate?" Her expression was a mix of shock and disbelief, and I don't blame her. Rora and I did a great job of sneaking around. "Aurora Belmont." "I don't know how it's possible, but her eyes widened further. "Rora is your mate?"

"Was," I corrected, feeling a tug at my chest at the admission. "I lost her." Selene pauses. Her brows furrow as she struggles to make sense of things. Suddenly, they jumped to her forehead like she just discovered the cure to world hunger. "Was that why she left? Our marriage?"

Now that the question was in front of me, I couldn't come up with a clear answer. Did she leave because of my marriage to Selene, or was it my words? If I handled things better, would she have stayed? "Honestly, I can't say. But I do know the way I handled things played a key role in the turn of events."

Selene nods in understanding with no questions asked, and I appreciate it. I'm not sure I want to recount the events of that day.

"I found my person, and I lost her. I paid dearly for it. The pain of it remains fresh and haunts me every minute. It's not something I would wish on anyone. It leaves you hollow, empty, and without a purpose. Once you find your person, everything becomes centered around them, and if you're ever foolish enough to lose them, nothing will ever make sense."

Selene studies my face, her eyes searching me frantically. "What are you saying?" Her voice is low and almost breathless. She knows what I'm saying, but she needs confirmation.

"I don't know, Selene. What does it sound like to you?"

"You can't possibly mean—"

"I can't possibly ask you to throw duty to the wind and follow your heart." I fill in the words for her as she gapes at me. "As someone who has spent their whole lives devoted to duty, I'll let you know at some point, it'll strip you of everything you hold dear, and Goddess knows duty won't grow old with you or make you smile through

the toughest periods." my words come out stronger than I intend them to. Selene's expression is a confirmation. So, I take a deep breath, choosing my words carefully this time. "We might have the most unconventional marriage, but you're my friend, Selene, and I care about you. I would hate to see you go through half the pain I have been through. You will never recover from that."

"Ironclaw," Selene whispers.

"Sorry?" "Ironclaw." Her voice is clearer. "He's the alpha of Ironclaw." "Look at that, another alpha for you," I say in amusement, and she laughs. I can see her shoulders relax and the calm slowly return to her features. For selfish reasons of my own, I'm incredibly thankful for this development. But despite my obvious distraction, I cannot miss the glint in her eyes. I've seen it before and had it at some point even. She enjoys being Luna of Blackwood, and, mate or not, our pack is one of the strongest and most influential. The pride her title brings is more than enough, and I fear this isn't something she's willing to give up easily. There's a knock on the door, one that brings an end to the lingering silence, "Yeah, come in." I say as loud as I can manage, both our eyes snapping towards the entrance in anticipation.

Liam walks in, closing the door lightly behind him as he turns to me, "I see you're up." He's wearing a bright blue sweatshirt and a pair of pants. His demeanor radiates an air of calmness.

I nod, turning towards Selene, who is standing up now, "I'll leave you two to it," she says, before disappearing behind the door.

"Been up a while," I reply finally, stifling a yawn.

Liam nods, walking over to my side of the bed and settling in the spot Selene just vacated.

"Any news?" I ask, not needing to elaborate more on my question. "Er..a number of arrests have been made since the attack. We're trying to figure out how that many people slipped in unnoticed."

I nod, my mind drifting back to Aurora. I need to make sure she's not in harm's way ever again. It's the least I can do.

"I have a big favor to ask," I say, sitting upright, "Can you ask one or two people to keep an eye on Aurora?" His brows raise quizzically, but he doesn't decline. "Sure," he says, "I'll get on that right away. I just came to check in on you." I draw in a deep breath and then exhale, "I'm alright. I'm healing nicely. Slowly, but nicely."

He nods, "Alright, I'll be on my way. Call if you need anything else." With that, he makes to leave but pauses at the door. "Does she know?" His eyes drift to my leg, which is all but healed.

I give the question a little thought before settling for a lie. "No." I hate to lie, but a positive answer will only bring about more questions. I don't think Selene is keen on letting anyone in on her growing bond, and frankly, I'd hate for anything to disrupt the current flow of things. With one short nod of understanding, he exits the room, leaving me to bask in the silence once again.

I'm not allowed near her, but that's not enough reason not to keep an eye on her. I need to know that in the event of another attack, she's safe.

Aurora

The cold tip of the gun presses against my forehead, causing shivers of fear to lick down my spine.

"So, this is where we part ways, beautiful." A voice says, his face shrouded by the darkness. There's a hint of a smile on his face, one that makes my insides churn in disgust. I swallow back a few cuss words, cautious not to annoy my abductors. I think about Ronan then, wondering if I'd ever get to see him again. My eyes pressed shut, steeling myself for the outcome despite my trembling exterior. I mutter a prayer but don't get to the end of my request. Just then, the loud jolting sound of a gun forces my eyes open and out of my dream. I bolt upright, my body dripping with sweat as I struggle to make sense of my surroundings. My heart is beating wildly in my chest, my brain a fog of incoherent thoughts.

I place a hand over my chest as I whisper soothing words to myself, "It's alright. We're safe now."

These dreams have been a constant reminder of that day, my mind not giving me a chance to forget the encounter. I sigh, sitting upright as I head towards the bathroom.

Pausing before the sink, I let the cold water from the tap soak my hands. Then, I lean closer to wash the beads of perspiration off my face. The coolness of the water is soothing, calming me and grounding me in the present. The last couple of days have gone by in a blur of moments. Most of them consisting of Ronan and I having long silly talks and playing board games. It's been us doing the things I would've missed if Damon didn't show up in time to save me. I return to sit at the edge of my bed, the

soreness in my muscles weighing me down. My hand goes up to my head, and my fingers brush lightly over the spot the butt end of the gun had collided with my skull. The pain, now a distant memory, had been excruciating. Thankfully, I am healed now, although physically.

The ache in my heart is persistent still, just like my nightmares, reminding me of the possible dangers lurking just outside my door. I put in for a few weeks off work and asked for Ronan to be absent from school for a while.

I didn't do it because he was hurt. I just feel the need to have him close to me so I can make sure he's safe.

I think about Lucien, my heart heavy with rage once more as the memories of his action floods my mind. Once again, he put his pack before me, and this time, the stakes were higher. As much as I want to understand how torn he must've been, I cannot get myself to forgive or excuse it, especially because this is not his first rodeo.

The thought of letting my son grow up around a man whose priority isn't family does not sit right with me, and it never will. But despite myself, I feel a mix of relief and disappointment at the fact that I haven't seen him since the attack. With everything I said the last time, I wonder if he's ever going to come around. The thought of him going away, never wanting anything to do with me, terrifies me for some reason.

I stare at my phone, wondering if I will come off as desperate if I call him now, just to hear the sound of his voice and maybe ask why. I quickly tuck the thought away. I already disappointed myself enough by flying back into his arms and having sex with him on the rooftop while another man was waiting for me. I refuse to keep putting him before everything else while he keeps showing time and again how little of a priority I am to him.

I stretch lightly, tucking my feet into comfortable shoes as I exit my room and head to

wake Ronan. I push his door open lightly, walking straight towards the windows and parting them to allow the sunlight to filter into the room. A few toys from last night are scattered on the ground, and I pick them up, tossing each one of them into a box.

"Ronan?" I call, almost absently, as I shuffle about the room, placing everything where it ought to be. From the corner of my eye, I notice him stir, but he says nothing. "It's time to get up, little man," I joke, with a playful seriousness in my tone.

He lets out a low grunt, still not making any attempt to move. I feel a weight of concern settle in my stomach, forming a small knot, the kind that makes my senses alert.

"Darling?" I call with my eyes on him this time. When no reply comes again, I freeze, letting everything in my hand drop to the floor as I bolt toward him, sinking into the space beside him and hurriedly gathering him into my arms, my heart thundering loudly against my rib cage.

I gather his small frame into my arms, shifting locks of hair aside to expose his face. His temperature is high. I can feel his skin burning against mine. "Ronan? What's wrong?" I ask, fear evident in my tone. "What happened?" I ask again with a sense of urgency this time, my fingers running through his tangled hair.

He mumbles something, though his words are unclear, and I reach out, forcing his eye open. I mutter an inaudible prayer to the Goddess, not wanting my fears to come to pass. I lean in, my breath on his face as I look closely. My chest tightens as I spot it, the faint glint of yellow in his eyes.

"Dear goddess." I whisper-pray, realization dawning on me. He's been away from his pack for so long, away from his kin.

Wolves, young ones, most especially, belong together. The bond of their kin is what

builds them into what they become as men. I denied him that the day I decided to leave. A small sob threatens to escape, but I place my hand over my mouth to stifle it. Whatever is happening now is just a tip of what's to come. I have heard of it, but never thought it would happen to my own son, not after all these years away. My breathing gets heavier as I realize just how much danger my little angel may be in. It takes all I have in me not to break down into tears right here, right now, my baby boy in my arms. This is all my fault. I should never have taken him away. But this is not the time to cry, not with him like this. I need to pull my thoughts together and come up with a plan. That's not going to be too difficult because there's only one solution for the illness that plagues him. I need to take him home and back to the pack he belongs to. Only then will he be alright.

I lower my gaze, watching him intently, my eyes blur with unshed tears. "You'll be alright, love. I'll make sure of that." I rock him slowly, my eyes never leaving him, and I wonder how I managed not to see this coming from a mile away. I'm a mother. I ought to know these things. A single tear makes its way just then, dropping onto Ronan's cheek as my fingers trace lightly over it. I'm trying so desperately not to cry. I feel myself shaking from the effort.

He shifts a bit, and I nuzzle him closer to myself. My heart flutters, unable to resist the urge to kiss his forehead. I lean in just then, planting a kiss on his forehead before placing him back in the bed and retreating to get my car keys. I'm not exactly alien to this illness. I watched it play out a few years ago in Blackwood, and I know how severe it can get without a proper healer.

Wolves are pack creatures, and community is important to us. With age, you can decide to go off and become your own person, but while still tender, the bond from the community is required to strengthen the connection between the human and the wolf spirit. Otherwise, the human body gets too weak to house the spirit and begins to wane.

I shoot Lucien a quick text to let him know I'm on my way, but I get no response. By the time I return to Ronan's room, he's almost as pale as a sheet, and the yellow glow in his eyes has intensified. It is his immature wolf spirit's way of crying for help. I quickly pull Ronan into my arms and rush to the car, wasting no time revving the engine and directing the map to Blackwood. I can't lose my baby.

Lucien

I pause at the door, letting my eyes scan the room briefly, a smile of satisfaction settling on my lips. I never thought I'd miss my office as much as I do.

I stare at the stack of files that never seems to reduce, a small sigh escaping me as I walk towards it, the timely clinking of my support stick reverberating throughout the room.

The pack healer insists I walk around with this stick, a carving from one of the finest mahogany trees. My wounds are not completely healed, and this helps ease the pressure of walking.

Pulling out my chair, I collapse onto it, turning to look out the window briefly. The view is still as mesmerizing as always. I draw in a deep breath, letting the smell of paper and wood fill my nostrils. I reach for the bottle of whiskey in a drawer below the wide desk, picking a glass alongside it and placing them side-by-side.

I pour a generous amount of it into the glass, bringing it close to my nose and drawing in a deep breath, letting the strong scent of whiskey burn from my nose down.

It's been so long, and I've missed the strong smell of whiskey. A knock on the door draws me back to the present, a sigh escaping my lips, "Come in," I say simply, taking a sip of my drink. The door creaks open as Liam walks in, his smile widening as his eyes land on the bottle of whiskey, "Heard you were back to work and couldn't understand why. It all makes sense now." I chuckle, reaching for another glass and

sliding it toward him, "I couldn't endure one more day of bed rest even if I tried."

He nods, settling into the leather chair right across from me, "How is it, though?" he asks, nodding towards my leg.

I recline in my seat, "Better than it was yesterday is all I can say." I hate how slowly I'm healing, and the fact that I have to walk around pretending I'm immune to the whispers infuriates me a lot more. His phone rings, the loud device ruining the peaceful atmosphere. Reaching into his pocket, he pulls out the device, his frown deepening as he presses it against his ears.

"Go on," he says, his brows furrowing as he stares absently at the window, obviously lost in thoughts.

"How long ago was this?" he asks, a finger suspended in the air as he pauses his attempt to retrieve the bottle between us. "Okay. Keep me updated," he adds finally, tossing the device on the table and sighing, his fingers wrapping around the bottle as he pours his glass. "Well, it turns out we're not the only ones whose tragedy keeps striking." His eyes never leave the bottle until he has poured a generous enough amount.

I hold his gaze, "Did something happen?" With a light shrug, he picks up the glass, taking a long sip, "There's been an attack."

I feel my body tense, "Where?"

"Ironclaw got hit by Silver Pack this morning. They're not done determining the number of casualties they have yet, so I'm guessing it's a lot."

The whiskey goes sour in my mouth, but I force it down my throat, regardless. Ironclaw. Selena's mate is the alpha of that pack.

"And the alpha? We need to reach out, at least, and find out if they need some sort of support or anything," I answer almost immediately. It's a good idea. With both our packs together and with the strength and resources we can pull united, I think we stand a fighting chance. "He died. That's the sad part," Liam's voice echoes over my thoughts, forcing my attention back to him.

"Their alpha?" I ask, just to make sure I'm hearing correctly. He nods again, the disinterest in his expression making it all too obvious that he's unaware of the fact that, in fact, he is his sister's mate. As if noticing my uneasiness, he looks at me, a brow raised questioningly, "What's with you? You seem too distressed about the news. Knew him personally?"

I nod, even though that's not entirely true. "He's Selene's fated mate. She only just found out."

He looks at me, his expression shifting from indifference to concern and then to rage, all in a split second, "And she didn't think to tell me all this while?"

"She only just found out," I repeat, lowering my gaze as I struggle to process the news. I remember how bubbly she had been the last few weeks, her phone blowing up constantly with messages and her constant need to disappear for days.

"You have to tell her yourself, you know." Liam is barely audible right now, his almost empty glass long forgotten.

I press my eyes shut, trying to imagine the easiest way I can have this conversation with Selene. Every scenario that plays in my head ends with her breaking down in tears or worse.

I nod, "I know."

I empty my glass, then slam it hard against the table, surprised when it doesn't crack. "They can't keep getting away with this." Liam nods, unable to do more than that at this point in our conversation. He has a distant look in his eyes, one that is paired with a calculating glint. The silence in the room is thick afterward, with both of us seemingly lost in thought, each one thinking the same thing. Silver Pack needs to be put in check at this point. We've all had enough of this senseless bloodshed. I sit in silence long after Liam has taken his leave, unable to get myself out there where I can possibly bump into her. But deep down, I know this is not the kind of news I intend to keep away from her, especially with how fast bad news travels. I pick up my support stick, putting one foot before the other as I make my way down the stairs to where I believe I'll find her. Just like I guessed, she's stretched on a couch, her face crumpled in a frown, her eyes on her phone.

The clinking of my stick against the floor gives away my presence, and when she looks up, her frown is quickly replaced by a smile.

"Up and about already, I see," she chides, a playful seriousness in her tone.

I settle across from her, managing a small smile, "Can't sit still. There's too much to do."

She shrugs, "You could've easily called me to come see you in your office if you needed company, a better alternative to you getting down all that flight of stairs like this."

I shake my head, not wanting to entertain her pity, "I'm alright."

Placing her phone aside, she drops her leg, giving me her full attention, "Alright then."

I sit for a while, unsure how to bring up the topic until she speaks again. "I have

news." She looks unsure, and her face is a museum of emotions, a classic cocktail of guilt, fear, doubt, and a small glint of hope and excitement simmering underneath. "I thought you already could tell me anything." "I know, but this is a bit different." Her eyes don't meet mine, and there's evident guilt in her demeanor, so she's certainly not aware of the situation. That brings me a little relief, but I also have no doubt whatever she's about to say has something to do with her mate. Are they getting married? Goddess please—

"I'm pregnant," she blurts out, bringing my thoughts to a screeching halt. "I'm sorry. I swear I didn't intend for this to happen. One moment, we were just talking, and the next—"

Her voice trails off, and she tucks her finger on her lap, her eyes glued to her feet. I feel my heart drop into my stomach, my mouth opening of its own accord as I process the news that, under different circumstances, would've been good.

"I'm trying to reach him, but he's not available. I was looking to share it first with him." She adds, her eyes resting on her phone only a few inches away from her. "Maybe I'm just being paranoid, but I can't shake off the feeling of impending doom. I've been more nauseous than usual. My emotions are a bit all over the place, and I feel like the center of my world was moved while I slept. I've been telling myself it's pregnancy hormones, but something doesn't feel right. My wolf is restless, too." "Do you—" she clears her throat, her eyes everywhere but me. "Do you think he lost interest? Maybe he found someone else, or he decided the situation is too complicated for him?"

Her eyes finally find mine, and the fear in them damn well cracks my heart. She needs reassurance, and I wish I could give her some. I wish I could tell her I'll send someone to him or something, but I can't. I don't lie. The news suddenly feels too heavy for me.

"Selene," I begin, the sound of my own voice surprises me. "I know. I know I'm probably just spinning out of control, and it's the hormones, but he always takes my calls. No matter how busy he is, he makes time for me, and this is not something I can just text him." Her eyes lit up like a light bulb just came on somewhere. "Do you think I should pay him a surprise visit? I mean, we try to keep our meetings private because—" she gestures between me and her, "but I really need to see him."

She sucks in a deep breath before returning her attention to me. "Sorry, I cut you short. I just have a lot in my head right now. You wanted to say something." She raises a brow, urging me to go on. I clear my throat, unsure how to approach the topic. I decide after I can feel her eyes still watching me that it's best I blurt it out.

"His pack was attacked this morning, and he didn't make it out alive."

She pauses, her lips together, her expression changing, "Who didn't.." she trails off just then. "Who didn't make it out alive?" Her voice is a few octaves higher now.

I stare at her, making no effort to elaborate more because I can see in her eyes that she knows who. I watch the initial excitement evaporate from her expression, leaving in its stead a deep, suffocating sadness. "I'm sorry.." I manage to say as I squeeze her hands in mine, communicating my support. "Who's responsible?" she asks, sniffing a tear. I pause for a moment before telling her in detail everything I heard from Liam. Once I'm done, she presses her eyes shut, her hands trembling as she sobs, the kind that causes her body to jerk uncontrollably.

Seeing her like this breaks what's left of my heart, and I reach out, gathering her in my arms as she sobs, her tears soaking through the fabric of my shirt, but I don't mind.

I run a finger over her shoulder, muttering soothing words until she's calm again, her sobs coming out in silent gasps now. "I have no idea what I'm supposed to do now,

none whatsoever. It feels like a part of me is gone, leaving a deep void I can never fill," her words come out in short hiccups. "He didn't deserve it, you know." I nod, mumbling an affirmative reply as she continues, "I need to know who did this. I need a name, anything."

"I'll see what I can do to help you with that." I make a mental note to get the word out to everyone who could provide the answers she needs that their service would be rewarded.

"I don't need you to see what you can do to help, Lucien. I need to know every detail of this attack down to the person who delivered the last blow. I'll come for them, even if it's the last thing I do. Silver Pack will feel the wrath of a wounded woman."

Another bout of sobs takes her body, and I hold her steady, my mind a maze of thoughts.

An idea comes to my mind, and I take my time to share. "Selene," I begin, causing her to raise her head, watching me with tear-stained eyes, "Now he's..." I trail off, not wanting to repeat it, "There's a vacant leadership position in their pack." I pause, waiting for my words to resonate with her.

"You can challenge their strongest warrior. You're a pure-blood wolf. I do not doubt your combat ability."

She's sitting upright now, a small space between us as she takes in what I have just said. "We're still married," she said matter-of-factly.

Her response is a clear message. She's not averse to the idea. The only thing holding her back is the fact that she is still tied to me. I understand her. If anything happened to Rora, I'd be out with teeth and claws, leaving blood in my wake till I found the culprit and made them pay.

I smile despite myself. "That can be annulled if you want." She needs to take out her anger somehow. I understand her need for revenge, and I also know if she's not able to avenge his death, she'll never forgive herself. We shifters are creatures of fierce loyalty, and our love is measured in how far we will go for our loved ones. Nothing will break a wolf like not being able to express their love and loyalty for a loved one. It's pure torture. It's a gift I won't deprive her of—the opportunity to fight for a loved one, to show him how much he matters even in death, and to let the pack know he was loved.

She looks up just then, her eyes glassy with tears, "You'd do that?" I nod, reaffirming her words, "I would."

****The annulment of our marriage was a lot easier than the marriage process itself. Apparently, apart from the consent of both parties and the elders' approval, there's nothing more to it. But now, as I stand here, my position in my pack under scrutiny, I wonder if I made a mistake by letting Selene go. It's a law that if the alpha isn't seen fit to rule, anyone can challenge him to a fight. I have been challenged to fight for what is mine, the greatest insult, as my father would say. I can already imagine him wincing with disapproval wherever he is. But without a strong mate and the loss of my wolf, coupled with my inability to heal, I've always known this would happen.

As I stand there in an open yard, my legs digging into the sand, I hear the loud cheer of the selected crowd. I stare at my challenger, a well-built man with heavy-looking biceps and broad shoulders. His expression is stony, and there's an unmistakable hunger in his eyes. Intense fiery orbs size me up, probably fantasizing of the life he'll have once he's done with me.

An alpha getting challenged to prove his competence is an event that has not happened in a while. We alphas are typically the largest and strongest wolves in the pack and to challenge one is a death sentence. I guess that's for alpha's with their wolves in tack. "This is going to be so fun," he snickers, cracking his knuckles. "You

used to walk around like you were the shit and had all the girls throwing themselves at you. I can't wait to get a taste of all that good life."

"Seen a healer yet? I hear shit that comes from the mouth is as deadly as the one that comes from your ass. Won't want you dying of verbal diarrhea before I get the chance to bury you."

"Bury me?" he let out a humorless laughter. "I don't know if you've been paying attention, but only one of us is lacking a wolf. I'll seal your tombstone, alpha," he says my title like he's spitting a dirty word, his eyes burning with hatred. I can't deny the growing tension in my muscles. I can hide it, but I can't deny it. For all the rubbish he's been spitting and his arrogance, my contender is well-built and appears very strong. I have no doubt his wolf will be a large one.

I can only rely on my human speed to keep tackling and not give him a moment to change. The injury in my thigh chooses the moment to tingle, reminding me of my predicament, and a string of curses tumble from my lips. I am at a disadvantage as both a human and a wolf. "You must've been dreaming of the title for so long, too bad you'll only be remembered as the fool who dared to challenge his alpha." His lips narrow to a straight line, and I know I've hit a nerve. I quickly harness the opportunity. "What's the problem? Daddy didn't leave anything to your name, and now you're stuck fighting others for what your father couldn't give you?" An emotional and angry fighter is hardly calculated and tends to make a lot of blind mistakes. I'm hoping he bites.

"You don't know anything about me." he seethes, taking a menacing step in my direction. "Exactly my point." My response is automatic, with a light chuckle and an eye roll in tow. "A nobody, trying desperately to be seen. Tell me, is there a woman in the crowd you've promised to make Luna? I'll advise to take your words back when you still have the time." I take my stance, rage blurring my vision. "I'll love to see you try."

With that, he charges toward me, and I duck. A timely save that sends him flying into a corner. That only seems to infuriate him.

He grunts, beating his chest wildly as he charges again. This time, I am not quick to dodge his open palm, and as I feel it slam across my shoulder, I stifle a scream.

The crowd cheers, everyone eager to watch. I shake off the noise, my eyes on him like a predator. A few more kicks of his connect with my midsection, causing me to double over momentarily. I straighten, despite the biting pain in my stomach, and ball my fists as I take a defensive stance. If I'm going to go down, then I'm looking to put up a fight. This is not about to be easy for him. I get a few punches myself, but not before his elbow connects with my jaw, forcing me to stagger backward and lose my balance, collapsing into the dirt. He doesn't rush at me. Instead, he takes his time to bask in the euphoria of this moment.

I can taste the blood in my mouth as I struggle to my feet, a wave of fatigue overwhelming me as the sores from my previous injuries seem to send waves of pain around my being. I kneel in the dirt, letting the noise fade lightly. Maybe this is it. Maybe I'm not fit to rule. Just then, I catch the glint of someone out of the corner of my eye, and I turn, blinking rapidly to rid my eye of the blurriness. Standing in a far corner of our gathering is Aurora and a child I know to be Ronan, sitting firmly in her grip.

A wave of panic shoots through me as I wonder why she's here. Her hair is a caricature of what it usually is. She's always so put together, but right now, there's nothing put together about the woman staring at me. Whatever the case may be, I can't stand for her to see me like this, a shadow of the man he used to be, weak and easily defeated. Through the fog of my emotions, I miss the fist flying to my face, and my neck twists in the most painful manner, the force of the blow knocking me to the ground. Somehow, amidst the cheer from the crowd, I make out a sharp gasp, and my eyes crack open to find Aurora wide-eyed, pulling Ronan to her side and shielding his

eyes from the brutality in front of him.

Maybe it was the shame, maybe it was the anger from all the disrespect I've been put through, but a surge of rage engulfs me, dulling out the audience and the noise around me. My opponent charges at me again, but this time, I'm quick to dodge his attack, rolling to the other side to give myself time to recover.

I stand, my eyes barely leaving her as I charge towards my opponent, ducking two punches of his and landing him one of my own. That seems to do it as he falls, face first, like a bag of grain into the dirt. The crowd erupts in applause, but my attention is somewhere else. But aside from Aurora, there's something else, a feeling I cannot easily shake off. It takes a moment to figure out what it is, but eventually, I do, and my eyes dart to her son. Besides the abnormal nature of her visit, something doesn't feel right. The boy doesn't look right, and for some reason, panic sinks into my bones, and an urgent need to protect him overrides the rage from earlier. It's a weird feeling, seeing as the protective instinct is something usually reserved for parents, but he turns around and looks right at me. A look crosses his eyes, and I can almost swear I see the spirit of his wolf ghost through his eyes. My eyes widen as I realize what is going on. I push past everyone in my way and charge toward Rora. I have a lot of questions.

Aurora

I can feel the intensity of his stare digging holes at the back of my neck, but still, I choose to ignore it, not flinching as he leads us into the pack house.

"Take him to my personal healer and instruct her to enlist every measure within and above her powers to make sure he gets better." I hear him say, and this time, I turn, matching his gaze as best I can. He knows I can tell from the way his eyes dart between Ronan and myself. I watch the maid take Ronan away, my eyes never leaving his tired, sunken ones until the door closes softly behind her. I draw in a deep breath, mentally preparing myself for this long-overdue conversation. An uncomfortable silence lingers in the air for what feels like forever before he finally speaks, bringing the suffocating silence to a timely end. "Now, Aurora." His voice is calm like he isn't mad at me, "I'm going to ask one more time. Don't lie to me," he says, closing the gap between us.

I can feel his breath on my face now, hot and humid. "Is Ronan my son?" he barks, the suddenness of his tone causing me to jerk away involuntarily, making me stumble a little before regaining my balance. Drawing in a deep breath, I lace my fingers together, comporting myself before I try to form a reply. Just like it is with mates, shifters get a pull on their kids. It's never as strong as the bond between mates, but in the event of danger, the feeling can intensify, almost like the child is sending out a signal to their protector. I have no doubt it's what Lucien felt. I feared this would happen, but I wasn't going to let my stubbornness and personal issues cost me my son's life.

I blink back tears, my chin rising in defiance, "Yes, he is," I say simply, not averting

my gaze. I bite back the need to say more. There's no need to explain myself, not when he hasn't asked me to.

He scoffs lightly, the hurt in his eyes as clear as day. "How could you keep this away from me for five years? Five whole years, Aurora?" As he speaks, he's shaking his head. He sounds angry and betrayed, but I don't blame him for that. But one thing I will not allow is him making this entirely my fault. "I asked, and you lied. You said it was some unmemorable one-night stand. Why didn't you come clean then?"

My lip trembles, and I fight back the urge to wipe the wetness from my cheeks. I can feel the tears roll down of their own accord, but I do nothing to stop them. I take in a deep breath, trying to quell the panic that starts to bubble inside of me.

"I wasn't ready to tell you then." He's watching me, his eyes tugging at the mask of bravery I'm wearing. "So, I missed out on five years of his life just because you weren't ready?" There's a hint of accusation in his tone.

"You made it all too obvious that I had no place in your life," I retort almost immediately.

"I was young!"

I let out a small, sarcastic laugh. "Yeah, right. Same excuse as always."

"For Goddess's sake, you're not entirely blameless yourself, Aurora!"

"I did what I thought was best for my son. You can't fault me for that," I say, keeping my tone calm despite my quivering lips. "Our son," he corrects. "You decided without even letting me know!" A low chuckle escapes me, "Your father threatened me, in case you forgot. I left the pack long before I realized I had a child growing inside of me!"

I run my fingers through my already disheveled hair, "I didn't decide to do anything. You made your choice. You wanted nothing to do with me. What was I supposed to do? Stay back and have your child while you gallivant with your mate, and he is known as the bastard son of the half-blood?" He's silent now. His mouth is hanging open, but nothing is coming out of it. So, I continue. "I struggled with him for years as it was just the two of us, and the one time I gave you an opportunity to make it up to us, you mess it up." I'm crying now. Hot tears spill down my face, and I sniff uncontrollably.

"I didn't mess it up intentionally," he says, reaching out to offer me comfort, but I shrug him off.

"There's always an excuse, always. For once, just own up to your mistakes and then apologize!"

He lowers his gaze, but not before I catch a twinge of regret in his eyes. He starts to say something but decides against it, his eyes straying away from mine. Guilt, shame, and sadness are dancing on his features. "You cannot pick or choose when you want to be in our lives, Lucien. I will not do that to my son!" I yell, finally losing control over the emotions that have been building since we entered the room.

The pain I feel is overwhelming. There is no way in hell I'll let him walk all over me again, not after everything. This has gone far enough. "Aurora," he begins, his eyes softening slightly, "There's so much you don't know, so much."

"Maybe if you explained it all clearly to me, I wouldn't be so damn clueless," I reply, my voice cracking with the weight of my emotions. I have a feeling there's so much he's not telling me, but I have no desire to push the subject any further than I should.

He sighs, his shoulders slumping lightly, "It doesn't matter anymore." Typical Lucien, never giving the full story but expecting me to understand, regardless. I'm not moved

by his antics. Turning to face him fully, I continue, "I'm not here for you. Don't nurse that thought. Ronan is sick." I feel my voice trail off at this point, so I pause, taking a minute to compose myself before I go on, "We're only here for as long as it takes for him to get better and not a day more."

I'm surprised to see his expression soften. He's hurt, but I don't seem to understand why. There's a lingering trace of an emotion I cannot fully comprehend. He nods slowly, "I'll make arrangements for a place you can both settle in for the duration of your stay."

"I'm not staying in your house if that's what you're offering," I say, almost defensively.

I feel stupid for saying it when I notice a smile playing at the corners of his lips, "It's not my house I'm offering. It's yours."

I trail behind him quietly as he leads the way to where Ronan is, pausing at intervals to let my eyes wander about his house. There are portraits lining the walls, from pictures of people to random paintings of the sunset. "After you," he says, holding the door open and gesturing inside.

I nod curtly, walking past him, my eyes scanning the room for a moment before it finally lands on him.

"Ronan!" I yell when I find him sitting upright with a strange woman sitting beside him. Both of them look up at me, but only Ronan matches my happiness. I open my arms wide and pull him into an embrace, burying my nose in the crook of his neck.

He hugs me back, his grip almost as firm as mine.

"He's better now. But he's not entirely out of the woods just yet." The lady says, a smile gracing her features and revealing a perfect set of dentation.

I nod, breaking our embrace as I turn to her. "And to whom do I owe my thanks?" I ask, stretching a hand in her direction.

"I'm the healer," she says simply, taking my hand briefly for a handshake.

"Thank you," I reply, my gratitude evident in my expression. She's not the pack healer I used to know while I was still here, but she has the same warmth and empathy the previous one had.

The woman shrugs lightly, "It's nothing." She stands, picks up a bag and turns towards me. "I'll return here later on to work my magic on him. For now, just keep a close eye on him."

"Actually," I begin, forcing her to a halt, "We won't be staying here." I couldn't help but notice the assumption earlier and strongly feel the need to correct it. "Oh," her face falls slightly, "My apologies then. Just get anyone to tell me where, and I'll stop by." I nod, my smile intact, as my eyes follow her out of the room. I notice for the first time since I walked inside that Lucien is still perched at the door, his hands deep in his pockets and his eyes on my son. Our son. I need to get used to that.

I turn my attention to Ronan just then, lowering myself to his height, one knee pressing against the cold floor, "You gave me such a scare," I whisper to him, trying my best to suppress a sob that threatens to escape my throat. I run my fingers through his hair, sniffing his scent as if for dear life. His forehead rests against mine, his eyes fluttering shut, "I'm sorry."

I shake my head softly, "No, don't be," I sniff in a tear. "It's not your fault at all." I hold him, pressing his fragile body against mine, my mind at peace now that I know

he's going to be alright. Lucien clears his throat, bringing our intimate moment to a premature end. He towers above us, a warm smile gracing his features, "How are you feeling?" he asks, his smile never faltering.

I lean back, reluctantly letting go so they can talk.

"Better," Ronan answers, his eyes never leaving the man as if trying to ascertain if he's friend or foe.

Lucien nods, "Let me show you your new home."

Ronan's eyes widen in surprise, "Why can't we stay? I like it here," he protests, his tone almost pleading. Lucien lowers himself to our level, "I have a feeling you'll like where we're going a lot more." My boy smiles, both eyes twinkling with delight, "Alright," he says, skipping happily towards the door. "Mum, come on!" For a brief moment, the similarities in their features throw me off, the striking resemblance almost palpable. I stand, turning towards Lucien to mouth an audible thank you as I hurry to catch up with my son, who is seemingly bubbling with excitement. I secure Ronan in the passenger seat before moving to settle behind, which is my own way of putting some space between Lucien and me.

I watch quietly as the both of them carry on in an easy conversation, my heart heavy with admiration I cannot easily shake off. I let myself imagine for a moment how our lives would be if Lucien had been present from the start. A warmth crawls into my chest as I bask in my delusion. But that's all it is—a simple imaginary scenario. The car comes to a halt. My house, from a lifetime ago, stands erect before us. As we file out of the car, my mouth hangs open in obvious amazement as I make my way inside, eyes darting about.

I pause in the middle of the room, turning to face Lucien, "This...did you do this?" He smiles, refusing to answer as he busies himself with my son. The house, both its

interior and exterior, is tidy and, from the looks of it, has been maintained properly over the years. I feel a tugging sensation in my chest as the memories of our time together swirl in my mind. I can almost smell his cologne as the memories of his skin pressing against mine fill my senses.

"Mum?" A low voice calls, pulling me out of my reverie. I blink, nodding in my son's direction, "Yes?" "Are we really going to stay here?" His eyes are hopeful, drawing a small smile from me as I reach to pat his hair.

"Yeah, we are."

His grin spreads, and he runs off, disappearing behind a door. Now, with Lucien and I alone, there's a lingering sense of unease in the air. I clear my throat, raising my eyes to meet his gaze. "Thank you for everything." I'm as polite as I have to be.

He nods, his fingers sliding over his face. "If you need anything, I'm just a call away."

I nod in reply, walking towards the door and holding it open for him. He stands awkwardly in the doorway, his hands tucked into his pockets. I push the door wider, reminding him he was just leaving.

"This feels just like old times," he says, his voice heavy with nostalgia. "This is nothing like the old times, Lucien." He takes a step closer, causing me to back up a bit. "But it can be. You're here now. This must be a sign." "This is no sign, Lucien, I am here because my son is—"

"Our son," he cuts. "Rora, please. I just need another chance, and I swear on my life I'll make you the happiest woman," his voice drops a notch. "And I'll be the best father to Ronan. You know he needs it."

"Don't try to blackmail me with him," I snap, my chest heaving. "Don't you dare try

to use Ronan to buy your way back into my life. He deserves a father who will stay. A father who will love and value him above all else. He deserves a man who will prioritize him."

"And I'll stay," he says, his steady voice a contrast to my agitation. "I'll protect him. I'll take care of him. I'll take care of you. Just give me another chance."

I suck in a deep breath, regaining my position at the door. "You have to go now. I need to keep a close eye on Ronan."

His eyes search mine for a moment before he nods. "I mean every word I've said, Rora, and I intend to spend the rest of my life proving it to you." His eyes move behind me, scanning the room before returning to my face. "Take care of yourself. I'll be back at dawn."

I waste no time slamming the door shut the moment he leaves. I knew this was going to be hard. What I didn't expect was his resilience and the effect it has on me.

It's just a matter of time, Rora. Ronan will get better soon, and you'll be out of here as soon as possible. I whisper to myself as I rub the area on my chest that won't keep still.

Aurora

There's a calmness in the air, the kind that frees you of all the aches that come with worry. I sit still, my smile in place, as I watch, with a great sense of admiration, Lucien and Ronan play around in circles.

It's been a week since our arrival, and so far, Ronan's health has gotten remarkably better. He's lively once again, and that is more than enough to have me content. A small smile graces my features as he locks eyes with me, waving wildly in my direction. I feel my stomach fold into a knot as Lucien meets my gaze, his sweaty body glistening under the intensity of the sun.

I manage a polite nod in his direction, and he mirrors the gesture. Ronan and Lucien have been attached at the hip from the moment Ronan started feeling better. He asks about him all the time, follows him to the pack house on a few occasions, and insists he comes around every day. Lucien is also really great with him. I can see the tenderness in his eyes whenever Ronan is yapping endlessly about a new interest or telling him about his toys at home. He looks like he doesn't want to be anywhere else, and whatever Ronan has to say is the most important thing, even if it's mostly gibberish. I've watched them play catch and seen Lucien take him around the pack to show him around. On one occasion, I walked into the living room to find them napping. Lucien was strewn across the sofa while Ronan lay on top of him, his weight supported by Lucien's arms while Guardians of the Galaxy rolled by on the TV screen. The sight brought a strange feeling with it, and if the situation was different, I would've taken a picture and treasured it for life, but I knew better. I wasn't going to start making permanent memories with a temporary man. So, I threw the covers over them and walked away. They continued in a similar fashion, spending

the days playing around and evenings watching movies till Ronan slept. I've made it a point to stay out of their way and limit my contact with Lucien.

The nature of the bond and how quickly Ronan grew attached to him had me shaken at first. I was worried about how he'd cope when we leave. But I am not going to rob him of a father's love, no matter how short the duration might be. I force my fears to the corner, allowing myself to enjoy this almost intimate family moment. My son is healthy and has been bonding with his father over the last week. That is more than enough for me. I do not need or want more than this. I hate how often I have to remind myself of this.

A familiar car pulls into the driveway, interrupting their game as they make their way, hand in hand, toward the pack healer. "Hey!" She says cheerfully, waving at me.

I put a hand over my forehead, squint, and then lean closer to make out what she is holding before I return her wave. It's a small bag, and the contents are not obvious in any way. Lucien and Ronan catch up with her, and the three of them are deep in a conversation. I wonder what they're talking about, but I fight the urge to walk up to them. When they begin walking toward me, I'm nervous, my smile faltering slightly. "Welcome," I say, letting her pull me into her embrace. She smells of lavender and lime, an odd mix that seems to suit her perfectly.

She nods, leaning back to speak, "I stopped to drop these off for Lucien."

My brow shoots up, a question dancing in my eyes, but I stay quiet. He reaches out to accept the bag, holding it firmly at his side as they exchange pleasantries before he excuses himself, with Ronan hot on his tail. She turns to me just then, "Also," she begins, "I was hoping to speak with you."

My heartbeat intensifies as I let my mind go through a number of reasons she'd be looking to speak with me. I think about Ronan, wondering if there are any lingering

complications for him health-wise.

Nothing comes to mind, so I walk with her back to her car, "Okay, go on," I urge, eager to get this over with as soon as possible.

She sighs, taking her time, "Have you considered staying here longer?" Without thinking, I shake my head. "I haven't. Why?"

She pauses, turning to face me, her expression a lot more serious now, "He's better. You can see that. Staying here is good for him right now, just until he's old enough to decide what's best for him and his wolf is strong enough to exist without community."

I blink rapidly, struggling to understand where all of this is coming from, "Did he put you up to this?" I ask, my tone accusatory. This sounds like a ploy to get us to stay here and live here if possible. I'm not going to fall into these twisted mind games. She laughs, a soothing sound that seems to echo around me, "No, not at all. Your son is my patient. I'm just concerned about him." Her gaze straightens just then, the smile fading as a frown takes its place, "Taking him away from here can cause another episode."

"Is that the only way it has to be? There's no way for him to feel better elsewhere, even if he has the best care?" I ask, worrying my bottom lips between my teeth. I need Ronan to be at his best. Watching him slowly come back to the boy I used to know and seeing him grow stronger in Lucien's presence has been the best experience. But we can't stay here. It's only a matter of time till tongues start wagging, and I can't risk the trouble.

The healer looks at me, her eyes heavy with concern. "He has to be kept close to his kin."

"I'll think about it," I say, not wanting to drag on with the topic any further.

She nods, "Please, do."

She turns to unlock her car, and I signal her to wait, "Can I ask a question of my own?"

"Sure," her confusion is almost palpable as she ticks loose strands of hair behind her ears, her eyes on me, watching expectantly.

"You brought medications for Lucien?" I ask, trying not to sound like a creep.

"Oh, that. They're for his injury. I give him a weekly dose," she says casually as if we've had a conversation on this before, and I'm familiar with the topic already.

"Injuries?" I echo, instantly regretting it when she looks at me, the surprise on her face hinting that I might be the only one in the dark on this subject.

"Yes, injury. He sustained a nasty one during the last attack. He lost so much blood he almost died in the process because instead of seeking treatment, he was hell-bent on rushing to save someone he insisted was in danger. It was the most reckless thing I've ever witnessed."

I feel my heart dip slightly, a wave of guilt washing over me. He was hurt in a battle when I was attacked, and he still came for me? Why didn't he say anything to me? And wasn't this weeks ago? How is he still injured? Question after question filters into my head, and I blink a few times to clear the fog.

"Sorry, how is he still taking medications for injuries from weeks ago?" I press on, needing to understand what was going on. So far, the healer has been the only one willing to answer my questions. Liam only drops by to ruffle Ronan's hair and ask if I

need anything, but he never sticks around for an actual conversation.

She steals a quick glance at her watch, "He..ermm... He lost his wolf about five years ago. That's why he heals slower than he should. The supplements I provide help boot the process, although not so much."

Five years ago, that's about the same time I left. An obnoxious thought of his predicament being a result of my rejection pushes into my head, but I push back at it. Mates reject each other once in a while, and no one loses their wolf. It's never that serious.

I feel my wolf steer anxiously. The news must've scared her. She's been slowly softening towards Lucien following our stay and even urging me to give him a chance, but I've been doing a great job of ignoring her.

I nod at her explanation, "Thank you. You've been helpful." She flashes me one of her smiles, "Anytime. Just have him give me a call when you're decided." With that, she drives off, leaving me in a maze of my own thoughts. I try to think back to that day to see if I remember any injury, but my mind can barely conjure a decent image. I make my way back home just in time to see Lucien saying his goodbyes to our son. My heart expands with happiness as I watch the easy laughter that spills out of Ronan.

One thing I will miss when we leave is the fact that here, in his pack, he's surrounded by people who love him almost as much as I do.

He pauses at the sight of me, his smile faltering. "Hey," he says, playing with the bag in hand.

I nod in reply, lacing my fingers together as I stare at him. His singlet sticks to his body, leaving grey lines of sweat on almost every part. "I was wondering," he begins, "if you and Ronan can come over for dinner?" There's a hint of uncertainty in his

tone, as though he's looking to try his luck with me.

I frown, not sure how he hopes I will react to this. "I..." my voice trails off as I spot Ronan, eyes twinkling in delight as he stares at us.

"Dinner? Yess!" He yells with that childlike excitement lacing his tone. He's clutching a toy with one free hand.

I frown deeper, realizing this has gotten to a point of no return. Stealing one last glance at my son, I let my shoulders slump in defeat, "Alright then, but just this one time."

They have identical smiles on their faces as they celebrate, making loud plans for dinner as Lucien lets Ronan tell him a list of food he wants at dinner. I let my gaze linger on him as he heads out, holding Ronan in place as he waves Lucien goodbye. With him gone, I let out an exhale, the exhaustion obvious now as we make our way back inside. So much has happened that's been left unspoken between us. I wonder if it all will ever see the light of the day.

Aurora

I am not sure what compelled me to accept Lucien's invitation for dinner, but here I am, standing at the threshold of his home, an uneasy weight settling in my stomach. It is not the house I once lived in, but it carries the same scent of aged wood and the faint musk of pine—his scent. And the ghosts of our sneaky nights together haunt every pillar. The familiarity unnerves me more than it comforts me.

"Come in," Lucien says, holding the door open. His voice is steady, but there is something else beneath it, something restrained. I hesitate for a second before stepping inside, Ronan's small hand gripping mine tightly.

Sighting Ronan, Lucien smiles, kneeling to Ronan's level and ruffling his hair. "Hello, big guy." Ronan let out a shriek in response, stretching himself to get to Lucien's hair. After lots of failed attempts, Lucien bends his head, giving Ronan access to ruffle his locks.

I stand by the side, fighting the smile tugging at my lips. I'll never get used to the feeling that comes with seeing them together.

"Come on, dinner's waiting," Lucien stretches out his hand to Ronan, who clings tightly to it. We follow him into the open dining room of the pack house.

I have no expectations for tonight, but I sure as hell did not expect freshly cooked meals and a kitchen that looks very used.

That surprises me. "You... cooked?"

A small, almost boyish smirk crosses his face. "I do know how to feed myself, Aurora."

I swallow past the lump forming in my throat. There is something so unnatural about seeing Lucien like this—domestic and almost gentle. I always got to see the calm, calculated, and practical side of him. This is different. Now, he is watching me like I am something fragile, something he can't afford to mishandle again.

Ronan, oblivious to the tension in the room, dashes toward the dining table, already drawn to the spread of food. "Mom, look! My favorite!" He points at the plate of grilled chicken and mashed potatoes, bouncing on the heels of his feet.

My breath hitches. Next to the spread were my favorite spaghetti and meatballs with extra tomato sauce, making the pasta extra juicy. It's just the way I love it. But that isn't what causes the tightness in my throat. He has known me long enough to know and possibly recall my favorite food. It's Ronan's that has me in awe.

Lucien remembered every detail. I can vaguely recall Ronan yapping about his love for chicken and mashed potatoes and how he thinks mashed potatoes are much better than ice cream. Lucien laughed for most of the conversation, and I figured he might chalk it up as a kid's mindless ramble, but he didn't. He listened, and not only did he listen, he made good use of the information.

I force my expression to remain neutral as I take a seat beside Ronan. Lucien sits across from us, his gaze never straying too far from mine. The first few bites are eaten in silence, the only sounds coming from Ronan's delighted hums as he shovels food into his mouth.

"You're a good cook," I finally admit, my voice quieter than I intended.

Lucien's lips twitch, his fork hovering mid-air. "I had a good reason to learn." His

eyes meet mine, and the weight of those words settles between us like a tangible force.

Averting my gaze, I focus on my plate, unsure of how to navigate this fragile truce we had found ourselves in. While I've become moderately civil to him—I don't want Ronan to find us arguing and bickering—I still haven't warmed up to him, and these gestures make me uncomfortable.

"So, Ronan," Lucien says, shifting the conversation. "Did you enjoy spending time with the pack today?"

Ronan nods enthusiastically, his curls bouncing with the movement. "Yeah! Uncle Liam showed me the training grounds. I saw warriors shifting! It was so cool."

Lucien chuckles. "Maybe one day, you'll train with them."

Ronan's eyes sparkle. "Really?"

"If that's what you want."

I press my lips together, watching the way Lucien interacts with our son. It was natural, effortless even. But that was the cruelest part, wasn't it? The promises and the hope.

While I cannot deny the efforts he's making, I also can't ignore the part of me that remains on guard. I'm worried about Ronan. I'm worried that Lucien is going to waltz into his life, give him a taste of his signature charm and sweetness, and leave just when he needs him.

I've spent the past years raising him in the best way I could. It hasn't been easy, but I made sure he has never lacked anything. If I'm to ever officially bring a man into our

lives, I have to make sure it'll be someone who can stay. Someone dependable, someone who will make him a priority and choose him over anything. I am not sure Lucien can be that man.

And there's the case of Selene. We haven't spoken about her, partly because I've not asked, but she hangs over us like a grey cloud. I gathered from the healer that she is on a condolence visit to Ironclaw. Something about them losing their alpha to Silver Pack, but she will be back, and she'll assume her position as his Luna.

It's part of the reason I find it difficult to trust him. He claims he wants to be a part of my life, but he already has one here, and as ruthless as Lucien might be, he'll not abandon his wife. I won't let him do that. I refuse to subject another woman to the pain I endured.

The past claws at the edges of my resolve, but before I can succumb to it, Ronan yawns, rubbing at his eyes.

"I think it's bedtime," I say softly, pushing my chair back.

Lucien's expression flickers, just for a moment, before he nods. "I'll take him."

Before I could object, lifts Ronan into his arms with the kind of familiarity that made my heart ache. Ronan barely protests, already half-asleep against Lucien's shoulder. I follow them down the hall, stopping at the doorway as Lucien lays Ronan down, tucking the blankets around him. He hesitates, then brushes a hand over Ronan's curls, his thumb lingering on his cheek.

The sight was almost too much to bear.

Lucien turned, his expression unreadable. "Can we talk?"

I should say no. I should bid him farewell and insist on returning to my home and letting the past stay buried. But something in his voice, something raw and unguarded, makes me nod.

He leads us to the back porch, the cool night air wrapping around us. The moon hangs heavy in the sky, casting silver light across the landscape. For a while, neither of us spoke. We bask in the silence, soaking up the glow of the moon while crickets and other creatures of the night serenade us with their chaotic harmony.

"I never stopped looking for you," Lucien finally says. His voice was quiet, rough.

I cross my arms, bracing myself. "You didn't look hard enough."

His jaw clenches. "Aurora—"

"You chose Selene," I cut in, the old wounds splitting open despite my best efforts to keep them closed. "You didn't fight for me. You didn't believe in us."

Regret darkened his expression. "I was young and reckless, and I thought I was doing what was best for the pack."

A bitter laugh escaped me. "And what about what was best for me, Lucien? You don't get to push your way back into my life and demand everything you threw away." I catch my lower lips between my teeth to keep them from trembling. I hate how this conversation still triggers me after years. Almost as though the wounds reopen at every turn.

"I didn't realize that losing you would cost me everything." His response is low, almost blending with the soft whispers of the trees around us.

The words hang between us, heavy and unrelenting. I have always wanted to ask him

about his wolf since the healer mentioned it, but I've not found the right time. Lucien is not exactly one to sit and chat about his feelings, and I can't imagine how difficult it must've been for him to rule without his wolf.

I suck in a deep breath, steadying my voice before speaking. "when did it happen?"

Lucien cocks a brow. "When did I realize losing you cost me everything?"

"Your wolf, when did he go away?" He stiffens at my question, his fist curling around the railing and gripping tight. The conversation is not going to be a comfortable one, but it has to happen. It suddenly makes sense that my wolf has been very quiet since we stepped into Blackwood.

I had assumed she was crippled by nostalgia and taking her time to soak in the feeling of being home, but I was wrong. This is her reason. She cannot feel or connect to her mate.

"When did it happen?" I repeat, my tone softer and urging him to talk to me. I could've easily gotten the information from the pack healer or one of the pack members, but I want to hear it from him. "The day you left," he admits, turning to me. "It wasn't just about the bond, Aurora. It was you. You were my strength."

My resolve wavers, but I can't let myself crumble. Not yet. There's still a lot for us to unpack. "Lucien..."

He lifts his hand, hovering it near my cheek before he lets it drop. "I know I don't deserve forgiveness. But I'll fight for it if you let me."

The air shifts between us, going from cool and breezy to warm and suffocating. I swallow hard, my heart a chaotic mess of longing and fear.

"I don't know if I can," I whisper.

"Let me try at least." He says, taking a step closer. "Let me show you how badly I want for us to work out. Let me show you how much I've missed you." Another step closer. "Let me show the beautiful family we can have." "You already have a family, Lucien." My voice is breathless and weaker than I intend, but it passes the message clearly.

Lucien lets out a small smile and straightens his posture, but he does not step away from me. "I was wondering when you were going to bring that up."

"I won't take away another woman's husband, and I sure as hell did not go through all of this to end up as your mistress in the end." "Rora," he says my name like a silent prayer. "You won't be taking anything from anybody. I've always been yours."

I let out a scoff, stepping away from his zone of influence to clear my head. "I believe everyone would have a very different answer."

"Selene found her mate, and she's currently at his pack to see his people through a difficult time."

The wheels in my brain spin at a very speedy rate, putting two and two together. A gasp escapes my lips. "The alpha of Ironclaw? Didn't he...isn't he...dear Goddess. How is she?"

"Not her best, but Selene's a tough one. She'll pull through." "While I never had a close relationship with Selene, she has always been one of the females I admired in the pack. I have no doubt she'll pull through. She was practically raised to be a leader, but at the same time, I cannot imagine the pain of losing a mate."

Lucien and I might've been separated for a long time, but the mere thought of his

death chills me to the bones.

I don't notice Lucien close the distance between us till he's practically in my face. "I told you it's going to be different this time. Even the circumstances are aligning in our favor."

Despite the haze of emotions clouding my brain, I find it difficult to disagree with him. The situation seems almost tailored in our favor, but I don't admit it to him. Hope will only get me hurt, and I cannot afford to trust in the words of a man or make mindless mistakes. I have my son to think about.

"Rora." Lucien picks up a stray lock of hair from my shoulder, wrapping it softly around his index finger. The movement is innocent and almost mindless, but it causes my stomach to flip in the most unnatural way.

It has to be his closeness to me. Even the air has gone from refreshing to being doused with pine and amber. His scent clouds my thoughts, and he is all I can inhale.

I make an attempt to take a step back and collect my thoughts before I make a mistake, but Lucien eats up the distance as soon as I create it.

"Stop fighting us. I know you feel this too." His voice is raspy and heavy with need, and his eyes burn at every point they touch. I silently curse myself for the emotions pouring through me.

"Lucien—

"Shhh," he places his forehead on mine, our breath mingling. My chest is heaving against his, the swell of my breast straining through the soft fabric of my shirt and brushing against his muscled chest.

His eyes trail from my eyes to my lips down to my hardened nipples and back to my face.

Just as he moves to close the distance, my phone rings, the sharp sound cutting through the stillness of the night and startling me out of the moment.

I fumble for it in my pocket. Pulling it out to find a very familiar name flashing through the screen.

Damon.

My throat tightens. I feel Lucien stiffen beside me, his gaze darkening as he catches a glimpse of the name flashing across my screen.

I hesitate for a beat too long, and Lucien exhales sharply. "Don't take it."

I look at him to find his eyes on me, pleading, and then back at the screen, my finger hovering over the button.

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:43 am

Lucien

The scent of vanilla and lingering traces of Aurora's perfume cling to the air as I sit behind my desk, fingers pressed against my temple.

Selene is seated across from me, her eyes scanning the map in front of her and making out territories that've been attacked by Silver Pack and weak spots. "These bastards are making more progress than we think. They're taking over every little pack in their path and using their warriors to boost their numbers. We have to do something quickly."

"We're working on it," I reply, watching carefully as her eyes light up with rage.

"Working on it? At this point, I expect us to be executing, not working." My lips curl. "This is why you're not a warrior." I lean back into my chair, supporting my arms with the armrest. "Silver Pack is cunning and no doubt calculated. They're aware of the damage they've done, and right now, they're waiting for us to get emotional and make an uncalculated move."

"And you're not emotional about this? Need I remind you that you lost—"

"I'm well aware of what we've both lost to Silver Pack, Selene, but emotions don't make great war strategies. We're going to hit them once, and we're going for the jugular, but we won't be successful if we lead with anger."

She takes in a steadying breath, and her clenched fist on the table loosens. "So, what's the plan?" "Liam and I are working on something, and we'll let you know as soon."

"I don't want you to let me know," she cuts. "I want to be a part of every step you make."

"Selene," I lower my voice, sending a pointed look at her abdomen. "That is hardly ideal for your situation."

Her pregnancy is only a few weeks old and has not started showing, but that doesn't mean her pup cannot be harmed. She scoffs. "This is exactly why I need it to happen soon. I need to rip off the head of my mate's murderer before this pregnancy starts to show and weakens me." Her voice drops to a defensive whisper. "I need to avenge his death. I need to look at my baby and let him know his father didn't die for nothing."

I nod in understanding. I can't imagine being asked to calm down should anything happen to Rora. I'd unleash hell on those responsible, and it would be carnage wherever I went.

Her eyes scan my features, resting briefly on my legs before coming back up. "You're not fully recovered, are you?"

"Selene—" my tone is low and with a very clear warning that seems to fly over her head.

"Dammit, Lucien, you can't lead a war like this." "Noted," I mutter, leaning back in my chair. My body still aches. The slow healing a constant reminder of what I've lost—what I gave up the night Aurora walked away.

Selene exhales, resting a hand on her stomach in an unconscious motion. "You should ask her," Selene says, watching me with measured patience. "You know as well as I do that restoring the mate bond would bring your wolf back."

I clench my jaw. "And what? Force her into something she doesn't want?"

"She's your mate, Lucien."

"She was my mate," I corrected bitterly. "I lost that right a long time ago."

Selene sighed, rubbing at her temple. "Yes, but now you need to regain it."

"I don't think my wolf went away because Selene left. He is punishing me for the way I treated her, and forcing the bond back won't cause him to return."

"Ain't you the noblest man in Blackwood," Selene teases, the corners of her lips slightly dipping before her expression gets serious. "I know you want this to work out between the both of you, but this isn't just about you. Your pack needs you. Your people need their alpha. They need to draw strength from their faith in you." "That's rich coming from a pack that challenged my position." She let out a soft sigh. "They love you, Lucien. They're just scared."

Her words carry a hint of vulnerability in them, and as I watch her return to rubbing her belly, I can tell it's the mother in her speaking. "You'll make a wonderful mother, Selene." She tries to hide it, but the constant belly rubs are a sign of nervousness. She's scared about the future.

Things might not have worked out between us, but over the years, we've come to develop mutual respect for each other. If a word of affirmation is what she needs to get by, I'll be glad to offer one.

Her eyes jump to my face, and her hand hovers over her belly. "I hope I do."

"I know you will."

"I really hope I do." She let out an uneasy laugh. "While I'm glad I was blessed to keep a part of him, I can't help the idea that I might get this wrong. I've never been a

mother before, and it might sound crazy, but I get scared sometimes."

The confession is definitely not one I saw coming, but it got me thinking about Aurora. If Selene, with all the love and support she has, can be scared of doing this alone, how scared was Aurora when she found out she was pregnant?

How scared was she to realize she was going to have to do this on her own, alone and with no support whatsoever? Not even from the person who got her pregnant. I drag a fist through my hair, tugging harshly at the strands to give my pain somewhere to focus. I failed her.

And while I remain grateful to her for keeping our son and fighting her way through all of it, I hate myself for not being there. I missed out on the crucial parts of my son's life because I was stupid.

I'm certain there's a catalog somewhere in her house with endless pictures of the memories they've built together and all of Ronan's milestones. His first step, his first day at school, and every important event, and I'm not on any page of it.

As if summoned by my thoughts, the door creaks open, and the atmosphere shifts from light to heavy and intense. Aurora.

She stood awkwardly at the door, offering a small greeting to Selene and me.

Selene takes her presence as her clue to leave, rising gracefully from the chair and offering Aurora a smile and a soft pat on her way out.

"Come on in," I say, ushering her into my office.

"It's a nice space," she says as her eyes soak in the woody interior. I hate that my space is still foreign to her and that she has to hover around me, but I can't help it.

She'll need some time.

"Thank you," I reply, gently observing her. This is the first time she has sought me out during her stay here, and I don't know what to make out of it.

"She was here for pack business. War strategies and all, nothing personal." I find myself filling her in on the situation without being asked.

I don't know why I'm suddenly nervous, but I guess it's the fragile nature of our relationship. I wouldn't want her to misunderstand anything.

Aurora's lips quirk, and her eyes finally bounce from observing my office to my face. "I know. I overheard your conversation. I wasn't eavesdropping or anything," she hurriedly adds, a pink tinge dusting her cheeks.

"It's alright. I wouldn't mind if you did. You are right to have your questions and suspicions."

She takes a moment, almost as if she is thinking of her next words. "She is right, you know." She takes a step further into the office. "The duty with your wolf needs to be fixed."

"Aurora—"

"Yes, Lucien. The situation demands it."

"I don't give a fuck if the situation demands it or if the balance of the universe is hanging on its thread. What I care about is you and your forgiveness. I will not let you do anything out of obligation. The pack will be fine with or without my wolf, but I need you to want this, too."

My words come out a bit too strong, and my chest is heaving by the time I'm done. Aurora stares at me with parted lips before blinking twice, as if she wanted to make sure it is me before her.

"Okay," she finally says, her tone almost as breathless as mine. She clears her throat. "I wanted to thank you for your hospitality and to inform you that Ronan and I will be leaving soon."

My heart drops following her words. I knew this day was coming. Ronan fully recovered a while ago and has been up and doing for quite some time, yet hearing it from her feels like the onset of doom.

Her eyes don't leave mine, and for a moment, I could delude myself into thinking that she wanted me to ask her to stay, but I don't.

The old me would've done just that. Gone to every measure to make sure things work out exactly how I want it to, but I'm not that man anymore.

I won't push her into succumbing to my every whim. I'll show her she has full control of the situation and can make whatever decision she wants to make.

All I can promise is to always be by her side, never give her a reason to doubt my love or loyalty to her, and prove to her she can depend on me.

So instead, I say, "Okay." The word tastes like sawdust in my mouth. It's not what I want. I want to give her all the reasons to stay and show her the good time we could have together, but I sit tight in my chair, gripping the arm to keep myself from getting up and showing her why she should stay.

Something that looks eerily close to disappointment haunts her features, but it's gone before I can register it, replaced by the stoic expression she seems to carry around

me. "Thank you," she mutters before turning and fleeing the scene.

I can't shake the feeling that I might've done something wrong, but my gut insists this is the right way. She might be disappointed, but I know if I tried to sway her, it would only add to the bricks in the wall I'm already trying so hard to demolish.

We will get there, but first, I need to win her trust, and I'm prepared to starve myself of my personal desires and drag my bare foot through hot coal tar if that is what is required.

Aurora.

The city lights stretch before me as I pull into our driveway, the familiar sight of our small but cozy home offering a strange sense of comfort and displacement all at once. The journey back was a quiet one. Ronan had barely said a word since we left the Blackwood Pack's territory, his usual energy dulled by something heavier, something unspoken. I knew exactly what it was. He spent the entire drive wearing a long face and staring out the window. He didn't even touch the grilled chicken I packed for him. I cut the engine and turn to face him. He is sitting in the back seat, his small hands gripping the edges of his booster seat, his eyes fixed on both in particular. His whole demeanor saddens me.

"We're home," I announce in a sing-song voice, but I don't get the excitement I expect.

Ronan blinks as if coming back to the present and nods. But there is no excitement, no rush to unbuckle himself and race inside like he usually would.

I swallow hard, reaching back to brush his soft curls. "Ronan," I begin, choosing my words carefully, "do you want to call Uncle Lucien?"

His face lights up, bright and hopeful in a way that both warms and tears me apart. "Can I?"

"Of course, darling," I say, forcing a small smile. "Go ahead."

I dial Lucien's number and hand him the phone before stepping out of the car, but not

before I catch the excitement in his voice when he says hi.

"Hi, Uncle Lucien."

I can't hear Lucien's response, but I can feel it—the deep timbre of his voice, the warmth it always carries when he speaks to Ronan. I wrap my arms around myself and lean against the car, staring up at the sky. I stepped out to give Ronan the feeling of privacy, but the curious part of me cracked a window open. It is clear tonight, and the stars are scattered like tiny pinpricks of light, much like they had been in Blackwood.

Blackwood.

I can't believe I'm saying this, but I miss it.

The realization hit me hard, pressing against my chest with an unexpected weight. I had spent years building a life away from the pack, convincing myself that I had moved on. But the days we spent there, the quiet moments, the way Ronan had fit so seamlessly among them—it had felt right. More right than I want to admit.

And then, there was Lucien.

I close my eyes, remembering the conversation I had overheard between him and Selene—the honesty in his voice, the regret, and the longing. He hadn't wanted that marriage. He is really sorry, and he wants to make amends. He never wanted anyone but me.

But is that enough? Does that cover all the years and the way he treated me? Can I ever forgive him for the nights I slept on the street, or the night I went into labor and was scared shitless.

Where was he when Ronan was teething and ran a fever so high he got seizures? My eyes prickled with tears at the memories of the horrendous times. I don't know how I'm supposed to just push it all behind me.

The front door creaks open behind me. "Mom, he wants to talk to you."

I hesitate for a moment, clearing my throat to dislodge the knot in my chest before taking the phone. "Lucien."

"Aurora."

His voice is strained, like he's holding back what he actually wants to say.

"Thank you," I say, my voice barely above a whisper, "For being there for him."

"You don't have to thank me, Rora. He's my son. There's nothing I wouldn't do for him."

His words send a shiver through me, but before I can respond, a knock on the door interrupts the moment. I turn, frowning. It is late for visitors.

"I have to go," I murmur.

Lucien sighs. "Is everything alright? With Ronan and the house. Did you find everything just how you left it?"

"Yes. Everything is fine." I replied, feeling the sudden need to end the conversation. Having him all caring and possessive messes with my head. "Goodnight, Lucien."

I think he gets the message because he makes no further effort to engage me in a conversation. "Goodnight, Aurora." My demeanor may be cold, but one of the reasons

I returned to the city is to clear my head and give myself space to think away from his influence. That won't work if I spend long hours on the phone with him and let him take care of stuff."

I end the call and open the door to find Damon standing on the other side, hands in his pockets, an easy smile on his face. How did he know I was home?

"Damon," I said cautiously. "It's late."

"I know." He steps inside without waiting for an invitation. "But I needed to talk to you."

I shut the door and cross my arms. "About?"

His expression sobers. "Lucien."

I stiffen, wrapping my arm tighter around myself. "What about him?"

Damon sighs, running a hand through his hair. "Aurora, I know you think he's changed and that he regrets what he did to you. And maybe he does. But that doesn't change the fact that Blackwood is dangerous. You and Ronan being there—it puts you both at risk."

I frown. "Lucien would never let anything happen to us."

"Maybe not intentionally," Damon admits. "But there are forces at play bigger than him. Silver Pack, rival alphas—there are people who would use you to get to him. And you know what happens to people caught in the crossfire."

My stomach twists into horrible knots. He isn't wrong. The world of shifters is brutal, and alliances shift like the tide. But something about the way Damon spoke made me

uneasy as if his concern ran deeper than just politics.

I study him, my eyes tracing the outline of his features. His hands are still buried in his pockets, his shoulders are tense, and his eyes are a bit shifty. "This isn't just about Blackwood, is it?" His jaw tightens, and his eyes shift, again. "No." The air between us thickens, and I know what is coming before he even says it. "I care about you, Aurora." His voice is softer, less certain. "I always have." I exhale slowly, closing my eyes for a brief moment. "Damon—" "Just hear me out," he cuts in, his breath coming out in shallow pants. "You deserve better than a man who let you walk away. Who let you suffer alone for years? I would never do that to you."

Pain twists in my chest. I know Damon means well, but he doesn't understand. Things have become a lot more complicated than they were before Blackwood.

Ronan is attached now. He has known Damon for a greater part of his life, but he never formed a bond like he did with Lucien, and I don't want to deprive him of that. Maybe it's not just Ronan I don't want to deprive of something.

"I can't, Damon," I say gently. "You're my friend, and I don't want to lose that."

His face darkened slightly. "I'll give you some time to think about it."

"I don't need to think about it, Damon. I don't want to give you hope."

"Well, I'm asking you to." His tone is sharp, causing me to wince a little.

"I'm sorry about that," he says in a softer tone. "I can't stomach the thought of you getting hurt again." "I understand, and I'm grateful to you for looking out for me, but I have to do this my way." He stares at me for a moment, a look I can't describe crossing his eyes before it's quickly replaced by a smile. "I understand." But I am not sure he does.

After Damon leaves, I stand in the living room, staring at nothing. My mind is a whirlwind of thoughts and emotions pulling me in different directions. Lucien. Damon. Blackwood. Ronan.

And then, as if the answer had been there all along, it came to me.

The Blackwood Pack had raised me and given me a home when I had none. The elders and the warriors, even the ones who had once doubted me—they had all played a role in shaping the person I have become. And despite everything, despite the pain and the betrayals, they had accepted Ronan without hesitation.

I couldn't just walk away from that.

I wouldn't.

Taking a deep breath, I reach for my phone and pull up Lucien's number. My finger hovers over the call button for a long moment before I finally press it.

He answered on the first ring. "Aurora?"

I close my eyes, gathering my resolve. "I want to help."

Silence. Then, carefully, he replies, "Help with what?"

"The pack," I say. "I want to help the pack."

Lucien exhales slowly, and when he speaks again, there is something almost reverent in his voice. "Aurora, I can't let you get involved in this."

"I'm already involved, Lucien. It's my pack. Blackwood raised me and accepted my son without—"

"Our son," he cuts in, but I ignore him, continuing with my speech. "Without questions. If Blackwood is gone, Ronan won't have a home pack."

"Is that the only reason you want in? To give Ronan community?" I don't answer the question. The answer is one I'd rather not confront at the moment. "I just want to give back to the pack that raised me, Lucien."

He goes silent for a beat before replying. "Fine. You'll help, but no combat for you, and I want you and Ronan far before the war starts."

"Lucien, that's—"

"That's the only way it's going to happen, Rora. I'm not losing you, and I sure as hell not going to let anything happen to my son."

His voice carries a tone of finality, and I know this is the most I'm going to get from him. "Fine."

I wasn't sure of many things.

But of this? Of giving back to the place that had once been my home?

Of that much, I am certain. I'm not one to ask for favors or be indebted to people, but certain situations require you to go all out, so I reach for my phone and pull up the one contact I can trust in moments like this.

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:43 am

Aurora

I'm sitting at my desk, staring at the contact list on my phone. My fingers hover over Katherine's name, hesitation curling in my gut like a slow-burning fire. It has been a long time since I had reached out to her for anything beyond casual conversation. But this isn't just about me anymore. It is about Blackwood, about Ronan, and about everything that had led me to this moment.

I debate between calling her and sending a text. A text will be less urgent and offer her the time to think and get back to me with an answer, but at the same time, I am not sure I currently possess the virtue of patience to let things play out.

Every moment spent holding my phone and delaying the inevitable only adds to the window of time required for Silver Pack to wreak the next havoc. Taking a steadying breath, I tap the call button. It rings twice before Katherine answers, her familiar, confident voice washing over me like a reminder of the life I had built outside of the pack.

"Aurora," she greets warmly. "I was wondering when you'd call."

I exhale a soft laugh. "You always know when something's on my mind."

"It's a talent. Or maybe I just know you too well. What's going on?"

"I need a huge favor." "Go on."

"I need to meet Queen Alice."

There was a pause. "That's not a small request." Just like me, the queen and Katherine met over a work project long before she became queen and before Katherine met her fated mate. They formed a friendship over business. Discovering they both had shifter mates seemed like fate and only helped to deepen the bond of their friendship, so I know for a fact that if there's anyone who would help me get a special audience and the compliance of the queen on very short notice, it'll be Katherine.

"I know. But it's important."

Katherine sighs. "You always did have a way of getting yourself tangled in pack politics."

"This is bigger than politics."

Another pause, then a shift in her tone—more serious now. "I don't want you getting hurt again, Rora. I know how quick you are to sacrifice everything for the ones you love, but these people, they've not been very nice to you and have treated you like a second-class citizen in your own pack—"

"But they still took me in when I had no one." I cut her short, sticking strongly to my decision. "I won't forgive myself if I sit and watch while everything goes to ruin, knowing I can help."

I understand Katherine's angle. I pretty much told her everything about my life in Blackwood, and she's only doing her part as a friend to protect me from hurt. But I know what I'm doing. I owe them now more than before, especially after the care given to my son.

"And you're sure this isn't about Lucien?" Of course, she'll pick on that. I worry my lower lips between my teeth, pondering her question. Sure, there's a part of me that still cares greatly for Lucien and might go out of my way to help him, but this is more

than us and the history we share. This is about a community and the lives that can be lost if nothing is done."It's not about him. Blackwood is still my pack, and I only seek to protect them."

Katherine releases a deep breath before replying. I'll arrange it. But Aurora—be careful."

I nod, even though she can't see me. "I will."

The meeting with Queen Alice is set for the next evening. I leave Ronan with his nanny and drive out to the designated location—an estate on the outskirts of the city, tucked away behind thick iron gates and a perimeter of security that made even the Blackwood Pack look lax in comparison.

When I step inside, Alice is waiting for me in a grand sitting room, her presence commanding yet surprisingly warm. She gestures for me to sit, studying me with sharp, knowing eyes.

"Aurora Belmont," she muses. "You've been causing quite a stir."

I smile tightly. "Not intentionally, your majesty."

"No, but that's often how the most important changes begin." She leans forward. "Tell me, why are you here?"

I don't hesitate. "Thank you for giving me an audience on such short notice. It means a lot to me and my pack."She gives me a gentle smile. "A friend of Katherine's is a friend of mine. Go on."

"Blackwood and Silver Pack have been at war for longer than I can remember. It's getting worse, and Silverpack is beginning to hurt other packs. People are dying, and there's no way to curtail the excesses of Silver Pack without a full-blown war or intervention from the royal family." "Is this what brings you to me?" she questions with a raised brow. I don't blame her. She's probably wondering why a half-blood nobody is so concerned with pack business."Yes, my queen. The situation is jeopardizing the lives of those I care deeply for."

"You know," she starts, leaning into her chair. "About five years ago, the alphas from both packs were here to seek a solution to the same issue."

The memory of Lucien telling me about the meeting slowly trickles into my present. It was around the time when he picked Selene over me, and I had buried the memory deep to keep the pain away. "I recall this happening, but I never got the context or detailed explanation about the rivalry or its history."

Alice regards me for a moment before nodding. "The rivalry between your pack and Silver Pack isn't just a simple territorial dispute. It dates back centuries—to the time when the kingdom was still establishing its rule. Blackwood was always one of the strongest packs, but Silver Pack was ruthless and always believed they deserved whatever Blackwood had. There was a time when they nearly overthrew the balance of power."

A frown creases my face. "And now?"

"Now, they still crave that power. Their current alpha has been waiting for the right opportunity to strike."

"Alpha Lucien's leadership was weakened when he lost his wolf," I say, realization dawning on me. "That made Blackwood vulnerable."

Alice inclines her head. "Exactly. The kingdom's legal system has never been properly structured to handle inter-pack conflicts like this. We've always relied on balance—on alphas respecting their borders. But Silver Pack doesn't play by those rules. It's clear we need reform, and I intend to make that happen." A surge of admiration rises in me. Queen Alice is one of the few leaders who has seen the flaws in the system and wants to change them. "How can I help?"

Alice studies me carefully. "By doing what you're already doing—standing at the heart of this conflict and asking the right questions."

I nod, absorbing everything. But a nagging feeling settles in my stomach. There is more to this war than just territory. And then, as if fate itself decided to drop the final piece of the puzzle into my lap, Alice speaks again.

"I also suspect there are spies at work within both packs."

The words send a chill down my spine. "Spies?"

Alice nods. "People with hidden ties, feeding information to Silver Pack. Some of them have personal vendettas. Others are in it for power."

My mind races. Spies. Hidden alliances. "I took a special interest in the conflict between your pack and Silver Pack, and not too long ago, one of my sources confirmed the alpha of Silver Pack has an illegitimate son."

"An illegitimate son?" I echo her words, wondering how it all fits into the grand scheme of things. "Yes. I hear he had him with a human before he got married, and now, he has promised him the alpha position if he can prove his worth by defeating Blackwood." I let the information sink in. Everything suddenly made sense. The resurrection of an age-long hostility with a reasonable trigger. All of this is for a bastard son to prove his worth to his father. What is it with alphas and needing their

sons to prove their worth?

"This son, do you know how he is or what he looks like?"

Queen Alice hesitates, and that lets me know she knows something. "Please, the lives of many innocent people hang on this. This can prevent the bloodbath."

She takes another minute before answering. "Damon, he goes by the name Damon White. He is a slippery son of a gun, but my sources—"

The rest of the queen's words fade beneath the ringing in my ears. The air is suddenly too thick for me to draw in, and I feel like the room is closing in on me.

My eyes sting, and everything is spinning. The whole world tilts on its edge, and the balance sustaining everything I thought I ever knew shifts, sending everything out of place.

"Aurora, Aurora." The queen's voice sounds like a distant echo in a long-forgotten part of my brain before it grows louder.

"Aurora."

I blink, returning my focus to her and forcing myself to maintain a neutral expression. "I'm sorry about that. I was just going over the name to make sure I've not met anyone like him."

She let out a light chuckle. "I'm sure you haven't. He's not known to stay in one place for a long time." Everything made sense. How he's conveniently present in areas I told him nothing about and how he is always there before I even need him.

What I can't wrap my head around is why he stuck around. Why was he always trying

to save me instead of killing me? Was he trying to use me to get to Lucien? Was he hoping to marry me and use Ronan as a future alpha to overthrow Lucien?

Question after question fills my head, and I massage my temple to ease the growing tension.

I toy with the idea of telling the queen, but I decide against it. Lucien has to be aware of every decision I make.

The queen's brows furrow in concern. "Is everything okay?"

Before I can respond, my phone buzzes. My nanny's name flashes across the screen.

Frowning, I answer. "Hello?"

Her panicked voice nearly stops my heart. "Aurora—Ronan's gone."

The room spins, almost knocking me out. "What?"

"I only left him for a moment—he was playing in the backyard, and then he was gone. I searched everywhere—"

Ice fills my veins. "Call the authorities. Now."

I end the call, my hands trembling. Alice is already on her feet, her expression deadly calm. "What happened?"

My voice comes out hoarse and trembling. "My son is missing."

Alice's eyes darken, her authority slipping into place instantly. "Then, we have no time to waste."

I didn't wait for her to give orders. I am already moving. My mind screams one name over and over again.

Damon.

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:43 am

Lucien

The maps of Blackwood and Silver Pack's territory were spread across the large oak table in my office, marked with red ink where we know their forces are stationed. Liam stands beside me, his arms crossed, his face etched with tension. The room is dimly lit, the only illumination coming from the desk lamp and the faint glow of the moon outside the window.

"This war is escalating faster than we anticipated," Liam mutters, rubbing his temple. "We need a solid plan if we're going to put an end to it once and for all."

I nod, scanning the information we have gathered over the past few weeks. Silver Pack has been making strategic moves, striking our weaker patrols, cutting off business routes, and stirring unrest among the smaller allied packs. But something wasn't adding up. Their alpha, Alpha Kaden, had always been ruthless but never reckless. And yet, his recent actions feel desperate, as if he is running out of time.

"We're missing something," I say, gripping the edge of the table. "Kaden isn't the kind to act without a reason. He's pushing too hard, too fast."

Liam sighs. "Maybe he knows something we don't. Maybe he has an ace up his sleeve."

I shake my head. "Or maybe he's being pushed from within."

The thought had been lingering in my mind for some time now. The attacks, the sudden aggression—it didn't feel like Kaden's style. "Is the detailed investigation I

ordered on every core pack member done?"

"I'm not sure. Liam says, fishing out his phone. "The investigator said he'll get back to me today, but he hasn't."

After a few taps on the screen, his face slightly scrunches before his brows raise with suspicion. "Do you know this guy?"

He hands me the phone, and on the screen is Damon's unpleasant face staring back at me. The sight of him causes bile to rise to my mouth. Like I said, unpleasant. "What about him?" I reply, handing the phone back to him.

"I am not sure, but there are rumors surrounding him being Kaden's long-lost son." My brows jump to my forehead, and my alarms go off. I snatch the phone from Liam, giving the face on the screen a second look to make sure it was Damon. While the bastard always left a sour taste in my mouth, and I have on more than one occasion wanted to tear off his head, I never pegged him as anyone important. "Are you sure about this?"

Liam gives me a questioning look. "The information is right there. It says he has a human mother and was raised in secrecy while Kaden provided the necessary help and support to them with the clear instruction that he wanted nothing personal to do with them. His reunion with his father was solely born out of necessity. Kaden has no son and reached out to him when he figured age was not on his side anymore. He gave Damon the condition that he could assume his place as his son if he could prove his worth by securing Blackwood."

My eyes don't leave the picture, and it takes everything in me not to hurl the phone at the wall. "How long has this been? His reunion with his father?"

This bastard has been hanging around Aurora from the very first day I ran into her. I

have no doubt he is aware of our situation and the fact that Ronan is my son. It is hardly possible their relationship is a coincidence." A little over six years. Almost at the time, the attacks started. But here's the thing. At the time of the first attack, the one that led us to the queen, Kaden had not found Damon. Their reconnection happened somewhere in between."

"The attack," I fill in, putting two and two together. The attack on my wedding night was Damon. "Fucking sneaky son of a bitch." Liam raises an eyebrow. "You know him?"

"He is the vermin that's been hanging around Aurora."

Liam's eyes almost doubled in size. "Come again?" "She said they were college mates, so I never bothered looking into him, but now it's all coming together."

"What is coming together?" Liam's confusion is still evident in his tone.

"His appearance, how is always around. She once said he's like a guardian angel and always appears whenever she needs him, but now that I think of it, what if he's always there because—"

"The situations were created by him to give her a false sense of security while he perpetuates his evil without suspicion," Lucien finishes off, and a new bolt of rage surges through me. The bastard has been hovering around my family like a fucking vulture. I'll make a corpse out of him.

"I want him found. Whatever it takes, I want him found and brought to me alive. Am I clear?" Before Liam could respond, my phone rang, cutting through the thick tension. The second I see Aurora's name on the screen, a protective streak washes over me.

I answer immediately. "Aurora?"

Her voice is shaky and frantic. "Lucien—he's gone. Ronan's gone."

The world around me slows. My grip on the phone tightens. "What do you mean he's gone?"

"He was in the backyard. He—he was just playing with his nanny, and she turned away for a moment, and then—" Her voice cracks. "I think Damon took him."

A growl rips through my chest, so deep it rattles the walls. Liam's head snaps up, already knowing something had gone terribly wrong.

"I'm coming to you," I say, my voice dark with promise. "I'll find him, Aurora. I swear it."

I arrive at Aurora's house to find her pacing in the living room, her eyes red-rimmed and her hands trembling. The moment she sees me, she rushes forward, gripping my arms.

"Lucien," she breathes as if saying my name is the only thing keeping her grounded. "We have to find him."

I cup her face, forcing her to meet my eyes. "We will."

She exhales shakily, nodding, but I can see the fear in her gaze. "He's just a child," she whispers. "He doesn't understand any of this. He did nothing wrong."

Rage burns through me, dark and consuming. "I'll kill him," I promise. "No one

touches my son and lives to tell the tale."

"I can't believe I never saw him for who he truly is," Aurora says, her voice cracking at the end. "He checked all the boxes, sweet, caring, reliable, and always there, and I brought him into my home, into my baby's life, without knowing he is the devil incarnate."

I draw her into a tight hug, placing a kiss on her forehead. "None of this is your fault, baby. You can't beat yourself up for something beyond your control."

She sniffs. "But I could've been more careful." "But you're no mind reader. Like you said, he checked all the boxes. There was no reason to suspect him."

"When I catch him, I swear to the Goddess I'm going to..." her voice breaks into a sob. "I just want my baby."

"And we will find him," I reply, rocking her gently in my arms.

I glance at the wall clock, wondering when Selene would get here. I asked Liam to inform her of the situation and to dismiss all the plans we had. This calls for a fresh plan and immediate action. A knock at the door makes us both turn sharply. I instinctively move in front of Aurora. But when the door opens, it's Selene, and next to her is Liam. "I came as soon as I heard," she said, glancing between us. "What's the current situation?"

Aurora tenses beside me, but she doesn't say anything. Now isn't the time for old grudges. Now is the time for war.

"He was taken from the backyard. I've sent out scouts and trackers. People are looking all over for him."

"We need to move quickly," Selene says, drawing out a map from a bag I didn't notice her carrying. "If Damon took Ronan, he'll take him to Silver Pack. He'll want to use him as proof to show his father how much progress he's making. Which means he's probably going to travel through this point." She points her index finger to a spot on the map.

"It has a train station that goes straight to Silver Pack, cutting off hours of road trip."

"Is this the only route there? I don't think he'll want to travel publicly, "I query, eyeing the spot suspiciously. It's a public transport system, and most of the people present will be humans. I doubt Damon will be stupid enough to drag a boy through the crowd."

"It is not," Selene replies, but it is the fastest, and Damon is a familiar face. I doubt Ronan understands the danger he's in, which will be to his advantage. They'll be a boy and his uncle traveling together."

"Oh, Goddess," Rora groans, sinking into the sofa behind her and burying her face in her palms. "What have I done?"

"You didn't do anything," Selene replies. "You're not responsible for the evil in the hearts of men."

Liam, who has been quietly gathering intel in the background, clears his throat. "Lucien, I also just received word from Queen Alice."

I turn to him. "Queen Alice?"

"I spoke to her earlier," Aurora says. "I was going to tell you about it. She's a friend of a friend, so I was able to get an audience."

I nod, signaling to Liam to continue.

"She's pushing to pass the new laws faster than anticipated. If she succeeds, Silver Pack will lose their ability to act unchecked and pay dearly for their actions."

It's good news, but it won't save Ronan. "It's not enough," I say, "We need to act now."

Aurora straightens, her eyes burning with determination. "Then let's go get our son."

I look at her, really look at her. She is much different from the soft, vulnerable girl I used to know. In her place is a woman with the fierceness that would ridicule a warrior and a will that will bend the very fabrics of fate itself. And for the first time, she called him our son. Our son.

I hold out my arm to her, and she slips her slender fingers into my open palm without hesitation. I have no doubt we're in this together.

I press a kiss onto the back of her palm. "Let's go get our son," I repeat her words, leading us out the door with Liam tapping aggressively into his phone behind us and Selene barking orders into her phone, ordering the assembly of all her warriors.

This is war.

Aurora

The abandoned estate on the outskirts of Silver Pack territory was our best lead. The air is thick with tension the moment we arrive, an eerie silence settling over the perimeter. Not even the birds are chirping, and you can hear a pin drop. They know we're coming. Our warriors position themselves in the shadows, waiting for the command. I stand at the front, every instinct on high alert. My wolf, though silent, pulses beneath my skin, craving blood and vengeance. This is the angriest I've ever seen her. Every protective instinct is out, and she can't wait to tear Damon apart. Selene walks up to the entrance, standing beside me, sharp eyes scanning the perimeter. "He's in there," she murmurs.

My breath gets caught in my throat, and I feel a hand softly squeezing mine. I don't need to turn to know who it is. His presence has always had a way of reassuring me. "Stay close to me," he says. I have a good mind to tell him I can hold my own, but the look in his eyes lets me know he doesn't mean it in an authoritative manner. Just like me, he's worried, and despite how hard he's trying to hide it, the situation is a delicate one.

I nod, my eyes blazing with determination. Liam signals that the warriors are ready, and Selene does a quick check with her warriors.

Everyone is ready. Silver Pack has hurt a lot of people and taken loved ones from a lot of people. It's finally time to make them pay for all of it.

Selene signals she's ready, and Lucien locks eyes with me, his brow raised in a questioning manner. I suck in a deep breath before sending a quick prayer to the

Goddess.

I am half-blood and have no prior training in combat. The only thing I have fueling me is maternal instinct and rage from being toyed with and betrayed.

Behind these walls are warriors trained to kill. I am no match for their strength. As though he could read my mind, Lucien's hands squeeze around mine again. "I'm here, Rora, and I'll die before anything happens to you." I believe him. Our history might not give room for a lot of trust, but I know with every fiber in me that he'll protect me. My wolf knows it, too, because a certain glow of confidence shimmers through her, straightening my spine. A sharp movement flashes through the window. I give Lucien a quick nod, and he gives the signal.

Chaos erupted the moment we breached the estate. Wolves clash, metal meets flesh, and growls and shouts echo through the halls. I move through them like a storm, cutting down any enemy in my path. There are torn limbs and body parts flying around me, but they fuse into a blur. My sole focus is on finding Ronan.

A grey wolf charges at me, forcing me to pull out the dagger Lucien forced into my palm on our way here. She's not a very big wolf, and I'm confident I can easily take her on, but I'm trying to maintain my human form. That's the only way Ronan will recognize me.

The wolf snarls at me, teeth bared and saliva dripping from the corner of her mouth. Her eyes are dark and malicious, and something tells me she's been waiting for this moment. I position myself to attack the moment she lunges, but she's cut mid-air by a white wolf biting into her neck with so much force the cracking sound of her spine fills the air.

Selene. She gives me a little nod, not releasing the whimpering wolf beneath her. I send her a nod of gratitude before making my way further into the estate. Then, I hear

it.

A child's cry.

My head snaps toward the sound, and my vision narrows. Every part of me pauses, narrowing my concentration till the battle cries drown and I can single out exactly where the cry is coming from.

I run, my feet hitting the ground in hard, fast strikes till I enter the building. Damon is standing in the center of the room with Ronan in his grasp. A blade is pressed against his tiny throat. My son's wide, terrified eyes lock onto mine.

"Mom!" Ronan cries, kicking against Damon's grasp.

My heart shatters.

"Let. Him. Go." Lucien's voice fills the room, hard and authoritative. I didn't notice him following me.

Damon's eyes shift to the spot beside me, his lips curling into a malicious smirk. "If it isn't the man of the moment."

Lucien let out a growl, taking a step forward. "I said, let him go."

Damon responds by pressing the blade tighter, my breath hitching with the contact. "One step closer, and he dies." "Damon, please. He's just a boy." My voice is weaker than I intended, but I don't care. Seeing that knife so close to my baby's neck has stripped me of every rage. One wrong move from either him or Damon will make a clean cut.

Something flickered in his expression—hesitation. Just enough, but it disappears as

fast as it came.

"Call off your wolves, or the boy dies." "Damon—" "Aurora, stay out of this." His voice is sharp and courteous, meeting me like a slap in the face, but I don't relent. If I have to beg to get my son out of here alive, then so be it. I'll definitely get back at Damon, but I need to get Ronan away from him first.

The battle around us intensifies, but it doesn't take much to tell who is winning. The screams, the growls, and the snapping of bones are a testament to lives given for the sake of what each wolf believes in.

A warrior walks into the room, whispering something in Damon's ears, and the cold, murderous look he had earlier returns to his face.

"Call it off." "You can't win this." Liam steps in, Selene hot on his trail. "More than half of your warriors are dead, and what is left of them won't take much to finish off. Let the boy go."

Damon let out a dry laugh. "You don't get it, do you? I can always raise a new set of warriors, but him," his eyes move to Ronan, "you will never replace the loss." He straightens, locking his eyes on Lucien this time. "I would advise you to choose wisely this time. I hear you have a history of making the wrong decisions."

Lucien's eyes narrow, and his hands roll into a fist, clenching hard. The veins in his body are pronounced, and his jaw is taut from how hard he's grinding his teeth.

"He's bluffing," Selene says, studying Damon.

Damon smirked, tightening his grip on Ronan. "Are you willing to bet his life on that?"

My stomach twists. I take a step forward before I even realize what I am doing. "Damon," I say, my voice steady despite the terror gripping me. "Please."

Damon let out a slow, exaggerated sigh. "I had plans for us, you know. I didn't expect to like you, but you turned out to be quite fascinating."

I feel my stomach churn in disgust. "I was never yours."

His expression hardens, something sinister flashing in his gaze. "No. But you were useful. Using you to lure him out of his pack while we struck and sticking around you to get some intel. You contributed to my success, darling." A disgusting smirk stretches his face, and I find the urge to hurl a projectile of vomit at him. That is why Lucien was late to save me. It would also explain Damon turning up without a call, but I was too angry at Lucien to pay attention to all of it. The strategic appearance at my house shortly after I came back from Blackwood. All of it to access the situation of things. In all of these, one thing stood out to me. Lucien. He came to me straight from a battle with an injured leg. Understanding dawns like a sickening weight in my chest. "You used me." I always had suspicions, but hearing it from him was different.

A flicker of something—regret, maybe—passes over his face, "Not entirely."

I seize the moment, taking another step forward. "So, what was the exception? Was there anything that would've changed your mind?" I don't know what my end game is, but I can tell the conversation has distracted Damon a little. His grip on Ronan loosens.

"You should've been mine. Together, we would've easily taken him, but you chose him over me," Damon spat, looking at Lucien with disgust.

"Look at him. He's so weak and pathetic he can't even access his wolf or keep you safe."

"I would rather die than ever be yours." The words leave my mouth before I can stop, and I instantly realize the gravity of the mistake I've made.

Damon's face twists in fury. "Then you can watch as your son dies."

Everything happens in a blink. Damon's arm moves, and a sharp glint of his knife flashes under the golden ray of the evening sun, its tip pressing against Ronan's throat. Ronan whimpers, his tiny body trembling, and a scream builds in my chest. My wolf tears through my flesh and releases herself in a flash.

A few wolves I never noticed hiding in the background rush into the space, heading straight for Selene, Lucien, and Liam.

Lucien moves first, but his movement is slowed by the lack of his wolf and the slight limp in his leg, which gives Damon a chance to switch the blade to his other hand and slice through Lucien.

The wound bleeds out, staining his shirt and making tiny droplets on the floor, but Lucien doesn't stop. He can't. His hands find Damon's throat, gripping and squeezing tightly, eyes wild with fury.

I shift back to my human form, my legs moving before I give the signal. I seize the opportunity to pull Ronan from Damon's weakening grasp.

His little arms wrap around me instantly. His sobs are muffled against my chest. Relief is so sharp that it is painful tears through me. Damon thrashes beneath Lucien, gasping, but Lucien doesn't falter. Even wounded, he still maintains his grip.

Selene's voice slices through the chaos. "Aurora!"

And that's when I see it. The amount of blood that has pooled on the ground and the

slight tremble in Lucien's shoulders. He is doing his best to hold on, but he's growing weaker, and Damon is slowly gaining on him. In a fraction of a second, Damon flips them over, trapping Lucien beneath his body and digging his fingers into the cut. Lucien's cry of anguish bounces off the walls and shoots straight into my chest. I look around me. Everyone is busy. Liam is struggling with a wolf on top, and Selene has a she-wolf throwing claws at her. I'm frozen in place. I have no idea what I'm supposed to do. I've never been in combat before. Lucien screams again. This time, his voice is muffled by Damon's psychotic laughter. "Is this your alpha? This is who you've chosen to protect your pack? Look at him." Damon grabs Lucien by the jaw, forcing his face to me. "Is this the mate you've chosen for yourself?"

Emotions tighten my throat at the sight in front of me. I pull Ronan into me, shielding his eyes with my palms. He doesn't deserve to see his father humiliated like this. "Get away from him!"

"Or what, Aurora? Look around you. Everyone is busy. No one is coming to save you." He directs his next words at Lucien. "I'm going to drain you first. Then, I'll marry your cute little mate over there and pump her full with my kids."

Lucien's eyes lit with rage. He tries to land a blow on Damon, but his reflexes are slow, and his swing is weak. Damon catches his arm, twisting it to an abnormal degree before driving a claw into his side and discarding him to the side like a ragged doll. "Lucien!" I scream, rushing to his side with Ronan beside me while Damon laughs. "Pathetic." "Hey, hey." I tap Lucien's cheeks, forcing his eyes open. He tries to keep them open, but he's too weak. The blood from his first injury and the new one mingle to form a little pool next to me. He holds out an arm to me, groaning at the pain from the effort. I waste no time in slipping my fingers into his. "Stay with me, please. Please, Lucien, stay with me." I turn to Ronan, who is clutching me with tear-filled eyes. "Stay with us." My voice is shaky, and I can feel the tears stinging behind my eyes. Lucien tries to talk, but he can only manage a cough. The light in his eyes slowly starts to dim. "To kill both father and son. How glad that makes me," Damon

mocks behind me, sending a cold shiver down my spine. It was him. He killed Lucien's father.

Lucien's hand tightens around me, and I can see how hard he's struggling with the situation. Selene's voice cuts through the heavy fog of emotions in my head.

"Aurora. The bond!"

Damon snickers. "No bond can raise a dead man." Selene lets out a battle cry, tearing through the wolf in front of her to lunge at Damon, but is tackled by another wolf from seemingly nowhere. This whole building is brimming with them, and they keep dropping out in numbers. This was a trap. Fears cripples me, freezing me to the spot. The bond between us has been broken for so long, buried beneath hurt and betrayal. I have no idea how I am supposed to bring it back. I didn't do anything to break it in the first place. Panic spreads through every inch of me. Selene is fighting against a wolf that has her backed into a corner, and Liam is still trying to fend off two wolves in front of him. My grip tightens around Ronan, who is trembling with fear, pulling him closer to me. There's no one to help. I'm the only thing standing between Lucien and death. I have no clue what I'm supposed to do.

Selene's voice rings out, urgent and heavy, as she drives a knife into the wolf on top of her and pushes him off. "Do it now!"

"Lucien!" My voice breaks, trembling with desperation, but he doesn't respond. His eyes flicker open for a moment, glazed with pain, his lips struggling to form words. "Stay with me, Lucien! Please, you can't leave me!"

He manages a whisper, his voice as weak as the flickering spark in his eyes. "Aurora...I..." The words fail, his strength dissipating like smoke in the wind.

I press my forehead against his, my tears mingling with the blood on his skin. The

bond between us hums faintly, a ghost of what it once was, and I feel my wolf clawing inside me, begging me to act. It takes me a moment to understand what she needs me to do. I quickly hand Ronan over to Selene and take in a shaky breath.

My hands press against his chest, over his heart, and I close my eyes, reaching deep within myself to find the remnants of our connection. The magic stirs, hesitant and wary, but I pour every ounce of my love, my pain, and my hope into it.

A surge of warmth spreads from my fingertips, wrapping around me before stretching out. I can't see the gust of energy, but I feel where it's headed. I channel every bit of strength into pushing at the energy around me till I feel it make a connection with something wild yet tender, strong, and bold. It's an energy so strong I feel my knees quiver beneath its dominating presence, causing my wolf to stir and know I've found him. In one quick moment, the bond snaps into place with the force of a tidal wave.

Lucien let out a guttural growl, shaking the walls of the old building and raising the air around us. The following moment is both magnificent and intense as his body shifts, bones realigning, fur sprouting all in a matter of seconds. The massive black wolf that has been missing for years stands before us, eyes glowing, teeth bared.

Damon barely has time to grasp the scene unfolding in front of him before Lucien strikes.

His teeth sink into his throat, tearing out his trachea and entire respiratory tract in one movement. The kill is swift and effortless.

Silence descends in the room, and only then do we feel the silence outside and the few warriors gathered outside the building. The battle is won.

Lucien stands over Damon's corpse, his massive chest rising and falling with ragged breaths before he discards the body with a kick. He turns, his wolf's gaze locking onto

me. And then, in a slow, deliberate movement, he shifts back. He is still bleeding, but not as much. He's obviously exhausted from the amount of blood he has lost, but he reaches for Ronan and me, his arms wrapping around us, holding us as if he'd never let go again. I don't fight it.

Selene exhales, surveying the battlefield. "It's over."

We don't get the chance to revel in our victory when a convoy of cars arrives, raising dust at the old estate. With my support, Lucien rises to his feet, and we step out of the building to confront the intruder.

The cars arrange themselves in front of the building, and the dust relaxes to reveal the royal crest stamped onto each car. My breath hitches. It's Queen Alice.

As if summoned by my thoughts, the car in the middle opens to reveal her in all her glory. She takes in the scene in front of her. Her nose scrunches up at the pungent smell of blood clinging to the air. This might as well be a glorified burial ground. We all bow to greet her the moment she walks up to us.

"I was hoping to get this to you in time before a bloodbath, but clearly, you already took the law into your own hands." She holds out a scroll to Lucien, her eyes bouncing from one body to another. "This is the new law. It states that every alpha should maintain their boundaries. There'll be no more unnecessary wars, and Blackwood retains the right over the company and all that has to do with the economy, finance, and politics in this region.

Lucien steps forward, prostrating as far as his injury could let him before taking the scroll. "He took my son. I was not going to sit around and do nothing."

Queen Alice nods in understanding, her eyes finally settling on mine before breaking slightly to look at Ronan. "I understand."

We all hold our breath as Lucien peruses the content of the scroll, each of us hoping the verdict is in our favor. He closes it and gives the queen a nod, and she turns her focus to the Silver Pack warriors who surrendered.

Alice steps forward, her presence commanding. "Your leader is dead, and your Alpha Kaden is to be sanctioned. A new leader must rise."

Silence. Then, finally, a warrior who looked much younger than Damon but seems to possess strength with the way he carries himself steps forward. He kneels. "I will lead."

Alice studies him, then nods. "Do any of you have objections to his leadership?" Low murmurs spread through the warriors, but no one raises an objection.

"Then you will answer to the new laws of this land. There will be no more of this bloodshed. Take this message back to your alpha and instruct him he is expected to report to the royal court first thing tomorrow morning. Actions have consequences."

With a soft smile in my direction, the queen returns to her car and exits the estate in a cloud of dust and goodwill. I instantly feel a weight lifted from my shoulders, and I let myself collapse into Lucien's waiting arms.

Aurora

I clutch Ronan closer to my chest, pressing a kiss to his temple. I can't imagine how close I was to losing him. The weight of all that happened in the past day crashes into me like a tidal wave, bringing with it little flashes of every possible way things could've gone wrong.

I'm grateful we're all okay, but I can't stop beating myself up for not seeing through Damon. I let my eyes sweep through what is left of the estate and decide that all the lives that were lost were lost as a result of greed.

Lucien's fingers graze mine, his touch hesitant at first, but when I don't pull away, he grips my hand tightly. His touch sends a shiver down my spine, not from fear or uncertainty, but from the realization that despite everything, despite the pain and the betrayal, we were never meant to be broken.

"It's time to go home," he says, a soft look lingering in his gaze as he locks eyes with me.

Home. Where is that? Blackwood? My apartment back in Phoenix? I've created a life for myself, one I fought for with every drop of blood in my veins. And as much as my dream was to be Luna a few years back, it's safe to say I have bigger commitments.

"Mom, are we going with Uncle Lucien?" Ronan asks, tugging at my other hand. Uncle Lucien. We're going to have to do something about that one quickly. There's nothing pleasant about the look on Lucien's face.

"I don't know, sweetie. I was thinking you'd love to go home." He scrunches his nose in disapproval. "But I want to go to Blackwood. Uncle Liam said I could run with him when I'm bigger."

I look up to find Selene gently watching us. She walks over to me, pulling me away from Lucien and Ronan.

"I know we've not had the best relationship, and our history is quite tricky, but take this from me. There's not one day he didn't search for you." This is the first time I'm having a one-on-one conversation with Selene, and I certainly didn't expect it to be this heavy and straight to the point. I can see why she's widely respected. She's bold and never shows fear. "He was mated to you." The only words I can form tumble out of my mouth, and her lips dip into a warm smile.

"Lucien and I had a wonderful friendship. We were good partners, too, but hardly the picture-perfect couple." She reaches out to squeeze my hand gently. "I know forgiveness is not easy, but as someone who is currently going through the loss of a mate, I can tell you it's way easier than dealing with eternal loss."

"And if it helps, Lucien never touched me, not once in the five years we spent together," she adds. It's all I can do to hide the shock on my face. She chuckles, releasing me from her hold and returning her hand to slowly rubbing her belly. I can't tear my eyes away from the motion. It reminds me of all the times I felt alone and how the feeling of the little one inside me was what kept me grounded.

"He'll be worth it," I reply, and she smiles in response. Some conversations don't require words.

"I hope I can reach out when it gets a little tough," she says it like a light joke, but I don't miss the glint of fear in her eyes.

I doubt Selene will have a story similar to mine. She has the support of her pack,

Blackwood, and her family, but nothing beats the presence of your mate or the journey of single parenthood. It's something I've come to know over the years. "You can reach out anytime." She nods, leaving me to return to her warriors while I make my way back to Lucien and Ronan, who are already chattering like birds.

He looks different with his wolf spirit. He's standing stronger and taller. Everything about him seems magnified, and I feel him like the air on my skin. My wolf has been restless since she felt her mate return.

"Hey," he smiles when he sees me. "What's it going to be?" I take one look at him and another at Ronan, and I find my answer. "Let's go home." "We're ready, Alpha," Liam calls out, bowing with a mock salute and earning him a chuckle from his friend. I don't know if it's possible, but he somehow seems happier about the return of Lucien's wolf than Lucien is.

Liam ushers us into the cars lined up for us. Selene insists she returns to her pack but promises to keep in touch, and to my greatest shock, Ronan picks sitting with Lucien over sitting with me.

The rest of the journey is spent in a comfortable silence with a few light-hearted jokes here and there. Ronan constantly asks questions about every twist and corner along the way.

We arrive at Blackwood at night to find the pack gathered in front of the packhouse. Their eyes are filled with curiosity, reverence, and something else—hope. They can sense the change, the shift in power, and in fate.

Lucien steps forward, his voice steady and commanding. "The battle is won. Silver Pack is defeated, and they'll not pose a threat to us or any other pack." A howl erupts from the crowd, a declaration of loyalty and unity. My chest tightens as Lucien turns to me, his golden gaze burning with something deeper than possession, something raw and real.

"One more thing," he says, his voice quieter now. "I wish to introduce you to your Luna, Aurora Belmont, my fated mate."

Time stills and murmurs spread through the pack. I feel a wave of nerves explode through me as I watch the shocked faces in the crowd. The bitter, familiar feeling of inadequacy raises its ugly head. What if they don't think I'm good enough? I might have attained impressive heights in the human world, but over here, I'm still the orphaned half-blood that lives in the cottage close to the woods.

"Come," Lucien stretches out his arm to me, and I slip my shaky fingers into them. "They'll love you," he whispers, and I draw in a shaky breath.

"Go on! Mark her already!" A booming voice teases from the crowd, and a chorus of affirmatives drown out the shocked gasps and murmurs.

I always had a clear picture of what I wanted my mating ceremony to look like, and this hurried decision is obviously a far cry from it, but everything seemed to be perfectly in place.

"You don't have to do this now." I meet his gaze, my fingers tightening around him. "I want to." It is the easiest yes I've said in my life, and I have no single doubt in me. This is the life I want, and this is the person I want it with.

The breath he releases is shaky, filled with relief, and something that sounds dangerously close to reverence. Before I can process it, his lips crash against mine, stealing the air from my lungs, claiming me the way he knows how to. My body melts into his, and my fingers tangle in his hair. The bond between us sparkles like wildfire. It isn't just passion or a drunken mistake on a rooftop. It's years of longing, regret, and love buried beneath the weight of pride and mistakes.

The pack roars in celebration, but I barely hear them. All I know is Lucien, the way he holds me as if I might disappear, the way he trembles against me, and the way he

whispers my name like a prayer.

We break the kiss to catch our breath, and my eyes land on Ronan, who is wearing the cheesiest grin. Lucien's eyes follow mine, and he chuckles. "He's just like you." I finally let myself say it after several years.

Lucien smirks, "of course he is. I'm his father." I roll my eyes at him. Guess the arrogance is going nowhere.*****

I've had to deliver jobs with very narrow deadlines at work and make my team perform the impossible in a short window of time, but nothing prepared me for the speed at which Blackwood can arrange a mating ceremony. It took exactly three days to get everything in order.

I can already hear the soft melody coming from the garden as a few young women prepare me for the ceremony. With one last dab of lipstick, the makeup artist steps out of my way to admire her work. "You're ready," she says, and the woman who has been playing around with my hair adds one last detail before leading me to the mirror.

My jaw goes slack at the sight in front of me. I'm in a flowy white dress with little moon figures embroidered into it. My hair is put up in the most elegant bun, leaving my neck bare—a spot that'll bear Lucien's mark in the next hour.

"You'll make the most beautiful Luna," the makeup artist says, beaming next to me, and the others nod in agreement. "The queen has arrived to bless your union. This is literally the best mating ceremony I've witnessed."

"The queen is here?" I only texted her to thank her for what she did and to keep her updated on how things are going. My mating ceremony only came up as a passing addition to the text. I never bothered with invites because I figured she'd be really busy, but wow.

"She arrived not too long ago," the woman who helped with my dress says, beaming at me. "You must've found favor in her eyes."

"He's here." Someone announces, and I suck in a deep breath before making my way to the gathering.

I spot him without difficulty, towering over every single person and looking absolutely mouth-watering in the traditional pack attire.

"You're....." he trails off, his eyes raking all over me and leaving flickers of fire in their wake. "You're absolutely beautiful, Rora."

Heat spreads from my neck to my face, and I force my eyes away from his to break the intensity of the moment.

The elders begin their chant, low and steady. Their voices weave ancient magic through the air. The ceremony is sacred. It's the final bond that ties an alpha to his Luna. I swallow hard as Lucien takes my hands, bringing them to his lips, his golden eyes never leaving mine.

"Are you ready, my love?"

My chest tightens at the endearment and the way his voice wraps around me like a whispered vow. "More than ever."

Lucien tilts his head, baring his neck to me, an unspoken invitation, and I blink in surprise. The alpha usually gives the mark first.

"I want to give myself to you first," he says, and my wolf surges forward, instinct taking over. I lean in, sinking my teeth into his flesh. A deep, guttural growl rumbles through him, his body jerking at the force of the bond snapping into place.

Mine.

His arms tighten around me, pulling me closer, and he wastes no time in sinking his canines into my neck, the act sending a strong wave of arousal and pleasure so intense I had to grip his shoulders to keep from falling. His breath rages against my ear. "I love you, Aurora."

I look up at him, my fingers tracing the new mark on his skin. "I love you too, Lucien."

The pack erupts in howls, their joy echoing into the night, but all I hear is the steady beat of Lucien's heart beneath my palm, strong and sure. "Aren't you the most beautiful Luna I've ever seen?" My head whips around so fast it almost disconnects from the rest of my body.

"Katherine," I let out an excited squeal, pulling her into the biggest hug. "You never said you'd be coming." She let out a small laugh, pulling me deeper into our hug. "That would've defeated the purpose of a surprise." "I've missed you so much."

"And I, you, but that's not the topic for today." She flashes me her signature lopsided smile. "Let's talk about how you're now a Luna and how your mate is currently looking at you like you just dropped from heaven."

I follow her eyes to find Lucien's eyes on me. He's surrounded by Liam and a few others, but his attention is completely on me. The intensity in his eyes sends a sweet surge of shiver down my spine. "Oohh. I know that look," Katherine teases, wagging her brows, and I playfully swat her shoulder. "You just never change."

"No. You love me this way."

I don't argue with the fact. Back when I was in a very dark place, Katherine's warmth and light energy played a key role in getting me going. She always knew what to say

to make me feel better and never hesitated to help.

"Thank you," I find myself saying. "Thank you for everything." My voice cracks a little, and Katherine pulls me into another hug. "No crying on your big day. It's gonna ruin your makeup."

Like I said, warm and light.

From the corner of my eye, I spot Selene making conversation with some of the pack members, and I wave her over. "Selene, this is Katherine. Katherine, this is Selene." They exchange quick pleasantries, and just like all the women I've run into, Selene rains praises on me and blesses my union before excusing herself to speak to her brother."

I spend extra time talking to Katherine, and we fill each other in on the past years and make jokes till she excused herself to go spend some time with Queen Alice, giving me the chance to observe the world around me.

The celebration picked up and was not too far from me. I spot Ronan sitting on Liam's thighs and nibbling on a piece of chicken. A feeling of completeness fills my heart at the beautiful sight, but Lucien has other plans of his own.

Warmth presses against my back, strong arms wrap around my waist, and a familiar scent envelopes me. Lucien buries his face in my neck, his lips brushing against his mark on my skin. "Come with me," he whispers, tugging me with him as we make our way out of the gathering and into the pack house. His bedroom door closes with a soft click, separating us from the world outside. Lucien wastes no time in pulling me into himself. "Thank you," he murmurs, peppering kisses on my neck, "for giving us a second chance. You won't regret this."

"I know," I reply, my voice strained and heavy with anticipation. "Ronan has to stop calling me uncle." He says between kisses, and I chuckle.

"I don't know about that. I think I love the sound of it." Lucien takes a fast nip at my skin, and I yelp. "You were saying?" His brow is cocked, and there's a hint of amusement playing in his eyes.

"I'll have a talk with him tomorrow morning. I promise." "Mmh.." He returns to his sweet assault on my neck. "And what are you going to ask him to call me?" "Daddy," I purr in a voice so wanton I couldn't believe it came from me.

A sound escapes him, something raw and unfiltered, and then his lips are on mine, claiming and consuming. I waste no time in matching his fervor, my hands flying to his hair and tugging at the strands while drinking in every sound he makes.

I feel like we've been dancing around an extended foreplay, and my body has been hanging on a thread, waiting for this moment.

My hands start to pull at the buttons on his shirt. Usually, I like a bit of foreplay, but not tonight. I've spent a great quarter of the mating ceremony eating him up with my eyes, and now I can't wait to feel all of him.

The buttons don't budge, so I settle for tearing the shirt off him. "So impatient," Lucien chuckles against our kiss before dipping his head to swallow me in one quick swoop.

The kiss is more intense than the first. His hand wraps around my neck, angling me for better access and squeezing lightly. The combination of his lips on mine and his hand on my neck gives me a heady feeling. My knees buckle from the intensity of the feeling, but Lucien is quick to catch me, expertly wrapping my legs around him without breaking our kiss. I don't feel Lucien move. I only feel the soft fabric of the mattress on my back when he drops me on the bed.

He breaks the kiss to trail his lips down to the nape of my neck, sucking at my pulse area while his hand grabs my boob, squeezing the soft mound of flesh gently before

proceeding to roll the peaking bud between his fingers.

A low moan escapes my lips, my back arching from the hot bursts of pleasure shooting through my spine.

Lucien plays around with my nipple a little before letting out a frustrated growl and stripping me off my dress. His lips come down at the nipple, hot and searing. Sucking, tugging, and nibbling, while his free hand played with the other, drawing a deeper moan from me.

"Lucien..." "I love when you say my name like that," he groans, pressing himself against me so I can feel his pulsing length on my pussy.

My walls clench at the sensation, and I can feel an unimaginable rush of arousal pulling inside my panties.

"I want you," I moan into his ears, gripping his shoulders and wrapping my legs around him. I roll my hips on his length, loving the feel of his muscles tensing beneath my touch. "You keep that up, and I'm going to cum before I get the chance to fuck you." For some reason, the thought of him coming from just me grinding myself on him seems so hot to me that I increase the rhythm of my movement. Wrapping my legs tighter and grinding harder. Lucien let out a groan at the same time I moan. The act is supposed to be to get him off, but the pressure from his shaft on my clit is too much for me to bear. I find myself increasing my pace and chasing after a high I can almost taste.

Just as I am about to topple over the edge, Lucien grips my hips, holding me in place and dulling the sensation that is building inside.

I let out a sound of protest, but his hold only grows tighter. "The only way you'll be coming is either on my fingers, my mouth, or on my cock. No selfish orgasm. Am I clear?" My stomach flips at the authority in his voice, and my head bobs on its own.

I've always loved it when he takes control.

"Now, be a good girl and take off your panties for me." He releases me from his hold, creating enough room for me to slip off my underwear. I hear his breath hitch and a string of curses follow. "So fucking beautiful."

"Spread your legs for me." The position had me feeling unnaturally exposed. He was still dressed in his pants while I was stark naked and spread out for him.

"Wider," he urges, his voice ragged and almost breathless. "A wave of self-awareness watches over me, and I can only move my legs a few inches apart."

"Wide Aurora. You don't know how many nights I spent dreaming of you. I want the sight of your pussy engraved in my brain." My legs must've grown a will of their own because they made a path smoother than a hot knife through butter following his words, and I feel the heat of his eyes on my pussy. Something about the hunger in his eyes emboldens me, and I begin to tease myself for him.

His hungry eyes follow my hands from my boobs, where I cup and play with the soft flesh before slowly settling between my legs. I hesitate for a moment before grazing my finger over my clit, shivering from the tiny bolts of electricity shooting through me.

Lucien's eyes are glued to me. Wide and unblinking, and he's increasingly steady. But the throbbing vein in his forehead gives away how hard he's trying to contain himself.

"You like watching me?" I whisper, my voice shaky as I draw light circles on my clit. Lucien doesn't give an answer. He merely swallows thickly, deeply captivated by the movement of my hands.

I spread my legs wider, slipping a finger into my pussy. The wet sound merges with my soft moan. "You like—"

Lucien does not let the words fall from my mouth before he snatches my finger away and immediately replaces it with his mouth.

"Oh fuck!" Heat spreads through every part of me, settling deep into my veins and reaching areas I wasn't even aware of.

Lucien sucks and flicks at my clit with his tongue before slowly introducing his long thick finger into my pussy.

The stretch is nothing compared to the pathetic work my tiny finger was doing. He almost feels me up. And when he adds a second finger, curling them to hit the spot inside, I'm a panting mess of sweaty gibberish and wanton desires.

His tongue and his finger find a steady rhythm, and he maintains it, tearing at the seams that hold my world together till they can no longer sustain their weight beneath the speed of his fingers, and everything comes crashing in at once.

"Lucien!"

My orgasm hits me like a flash of white light, dulling out other senses and magnifying the feeling between my legs. My hips gyrate off the bed, rocking recklessly, but Lucien holds me in place. His mouth did not leave me till I rode through the waves in loud screams and teary eyes.

Lucien's mouth finally detaches from me as I crumble onto the bed in a mess of liquid bones and heavy eyes, but he's not done.

I don't recall hearing the metallic clang of his belt hitting the floor or the rustle of him removing his pants.

All I feel is the thick head of his cock parting my folds and slamming into me before I can open my eyes.

I almost pass out from the wave of pleasure that slams into me. I've always heard that sex with your mate after you've marked each other was great, but great does not come close to the way my blood is boiling over or the way my walls are quivering and clenching tightly against him.

"You fit me so fucking well." He groans, pulling all the way out before slamming himself back into me and rolling his hips to stimulate my clit.

"Goddess," I cry out, my voice hoarse from screaming and tears pulling at the side of my eyes. Lucien catches my lips in a bruising kiss, drinking my moans while his hips repeatedly slam into mine, drowning the room in wet sounds of flesh hitting flesh and the nearly embracing, squishy sound from my pussy.

"I could fuck you all day and still want more," he groans into our kiss, and I only hope he keeps to it.

I've had sex with Lucien multiple times, but everything about this feels different, from the depth to the vulnerability to the passion and intensity. It's all too much, and I know it's not just about the mating bond.

It's from the years we spent apart. The broken bond that had to fix itself. A trust level that's been tested and rebuilt and a love that had to regrow from scratch.

We are more than we ever were to each other, and every part of us recognizes it.

"I love you." The confession came before he delivered a long, hard stroke, taking me with him to the clouds and back.

I wrap myself around him, clinging to him as we ride through the waves of pleasure together till his movement slows down to slow lazy strokes.

"I love you, Aurora Ravenclaw." He whispers between ragged breaths, pressing a kiss

into my hair."I love you, too," I mutter, torn between the soft lulls of sleep and the feeling of my insatiable pussy clenching around his hardening cock.

This is going to be the longest night, and I wouldn't have it any other way. I'd rather have these sleepless nights with him than have a long-rested night without him. I know without an iota of doubt that the rest of my life has just begun and it's going to be far better than the last. I'm going to enjoy every single chapter of it, and, honestly, I can't wait to dive into it already and explore all the beautiful things the Goddess has in store for us.