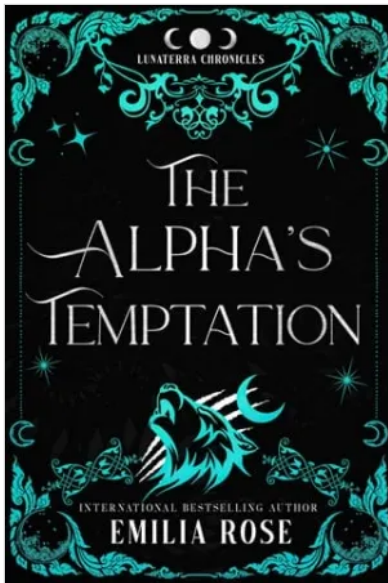




The Alpha's Temptation (The Lunaterra Chronicles #12)

Author: *Emilia Rose*

Category: Fantasy

Description: Livia has always lived under her father's iron rule, but rebellion burns in her veins.

When she crosses paths with Caelan—her father's best friend and the strongest alpha in their land—an intoxicating spark ignites.

Their age gap and forbidden bond threaten to topple the fragile peace of the realm.

Torn between loyalty and desire, can they resist their fated pull—or will surrendering to passion destroy them both?

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Page 1

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LIVIA

“Don’t say a fucking word,” Alpha Caelan growled into my ear, his huge hand pressed over my mouth to muffle my moans. Streaks of silver moonlight glimmered across the stone in the courtyard, just outside his office window. He pushed himself into me. “Not a word.”

I whimpered and peered up at him, brows furrowed together.

Lycos, he is so big!

His muscles swelled underneath the light, his jaw chiseled. With everyone else, his eyes were usually dull, dreary, and heavy with the weight of our entire pack. But with me, late at night when everyone else was supposed to be asleep, they were a blazing gold.

Everything about this was so wrong.

He was twice my age, my dad’s best friend, and the alpha of my pack...

“Caelan,” I murmured against his hand.

After thrusting me against the window, he growled into my ear, “I said, ‘Not a word.’”

My pussy tightened around him. He continued pumping in and out of me, his thrusts quickening. I curled my fingers around the windowsill and squeezed my eyes closed,

the pressure building higher and higher inside me.

Not a soul in our pack suspected that I had begun sneaking into his office to see him, not like this. No, I made sure that everyone thought I hated him—because I did. For the most part. Until he touched me like he was made for me.

“You’ve been avoiding me all week,” he snarled into my ear, pumping faster.

“My dad?—”

Before I could say another word, his other hand was on my clit. He smacked it, then rubbed the sensitive little bud before slapping it again as a punishment for going directly against his orders.

“Your father can never know about us,” Alpha Caelan murmured against my bare neck, his lips trailing ever so slightly against my skin. “Do you understand me?”

I pressed my back flat against the wood, heart racing so loudly that I could hear it in my ears, and nodded, lost in the pleasure that surged through my body. Dad’s most trusted friend was inside me.

Pumping in and out. Telling me to keep quiet. Using me.

Lycos, what a rush!

My pussy tightened around him, and I dug my fingernails into his muscular shoulders. The flickering light from the torches in his office danced over our skin, casting wavering shadows on the walls. I really shouldn’t be here; Dad was in the next room.

“This fucking pussy...” he growled into my ear, my legs now resting in the crooks of

his elbows. He pushed himself into me again, so agonizingly slowly, gliding his canines up the column of my neck. "...Fuck, you're always so tight."

The scent of bone broth drifted through my nose from the packhouse kitchen, just a few doors down. Caelan's cooks were preparing meals for our travel to the Capital tomorrow, and here I was being absolutely ruined by him.

My head lolled back, and I moaned softly into his hand.

I should've kept quiet. I really should've. But I couldn't.

Hell, being here was reckless, especially the night before we left for the Capital and the royal wedding. I hadn't packed yet, I had to be up in three hours, and I'd promised Dad that I'd be on my best behavior for the event.

But I couldn't stop myself.

Not when Caelan asked me to come to his office tonight. He never asked!

His canines brushed against my neck, and for the first time since I met him several months ago, I thought my mate was finally going to claim me. It had been over seven full moons without a mark, going into heat and locking myself in my room so no other wolf would take me.

Pure fucking torture, and he had somehow stayed sane throughout it all.

"Please," I whispered, clamping down around him. "Please, I need it."

No matter how much I pleaded with him, I knew that he wouldn't mark me. Life was too complicated with Dad being Caelan's beta, with the looming war with the Whispering Pines Pack, with rogues attacking those closest to Caelan to hurt him.

He didn't want me in the middle of it. At least, that's what he told me.

"I need a fucking taste of you," he murmured.

Caelan walked with me in his strong arms all the way across the room and deposited me on his desk. After placing my legs on his shoulders, he dropped to his knees and tugged my ass to the edge of the table, peppering wet kisses up my inner thighs.

I inhaled sharply and tried to pull my legs together, but he wasn't having it. He forced them apart and placed his mouth on my pussy, sliding his tongue up my slit to my clit. My fingers curled around the edge of the desk.

He lapped at my clit, eating it a little more possessively than usual tonight.

"What've you been doing with Chase?" he asked.

My eyes widened. Chase? Where had he seen me with him?

"You belong to me," he growled, staring up at me from his knees. " Me ."

Was Alpha Caelan jealous? My lips curled into a smirk. Good.

From the moment Mom died and Dad brought me back to his pack, Caelan and I had hated each other. It had been a constant push and pull, a constant back and forth, a constant love-hate relationship.

And I was done with it.

He'd either mark me or I would have to force him to. And if I had to use Chase or any other wolf to do that, then I would.

“A strong alpha would mark his mate,” I taunted. “He’d mark her with no regrets.”

A ferocious snarl left his mouth, the mere sound vibrating my clit. I dragged my knees closer to my chest, my toes curling on his shoulders. I stared down at him, meeting the intensity in his eyes.

“Don’t be a little bra?—”

“Don’t pretend you’re the only one with something to lose,” I said. “Mark me.”

Though he had scars from battles older than me, Caelan was... between my legs with his canines on my skin and his restraint so fragile. And me? I would do anything to break him. The longer we let this go on, the thinner and thinner his restraint became.

“You’re mine,” he growled. “Don’t let me see you with Chase again.” He buried his face between my legs, eating and eating and eating until my entire body was tingling. “You’re mine. All mine.”

His? Is that what he thinks?

“Say it,” he ordered. “Say you’re mine.”

Caelan wanted obedience, something he knew I’d never give him willingly. That’s what everyone in our pack did, especially if he used his alpha command on them. They couldn’t resist, but I could.

That command had never worked on me, and he loathed it.

“If there’s no mark on my neck,” I said, curling my fingers into his hair and pulling his mouth back down on my clit, “then I’m not yours.”

“Don’t be a fucking brat.”

“Anyone can take me, claim me,” I moaned softly. “I’m not yours.”

“Livia.”

“ Alpha .”

Before I knew it, his hand snapped around my neck and his mouth was on my throat, his teeth grazing my skin. “You’re going to get me killed.”

Was that all I had to do? Tell him that I’d find someone else? That—

Just before he could sink his canines into my neck, just before he lost complete control, just before he finally forged the mate bond, someone knocked at the door. Then Dad’s voice broke through the tense silence.

“Caelan, you still up? We need to talk.”

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LIVIA

Shit! What is he doing here at this hour?!

I shoved Caelan's chest, but he didn't move. Instead, he pushed himself farther inside me, clutching my waist as hard as he could to drive his cock deeper. I opened and closed my mouth a handful of times, pleading with my eyes.

Truth was, we really both did have a lot to lose if anyone found out about us. I was already looked down upon by this pack because I hadn't shifted into my wolf yet, when most wolves could at thirteen. I didn't need another target on my back.

She-wolves were fucking ruthless.

"One moment, Marcus," Caelan called, pumping into me harder and faster.

My eyes widened, and I slapped a hand over my mouth, my eyes rolling back into my head. Pressure rose higher and higher inside me, and I curled my toes, my hands both pushing and pulling him.

Holy fuck, if he didn't slow down, then I was going to... I was going to...

"Come for me, little mate."

Pleasure exploded through my body, and I stifled a moan before it could fully leave my mouth. My legs trembled uncontrollably, my body buzzing with ecstasy. Wave after wave rushed through me, my pussy clenching over and over on him.

“You have to hide,” Caelan said, voice raspy, dumping his cum deep in my cunt.

“He’s going to smell me here,” I whispered.

“My scent is dripping out of you. He won’t smell you.”

When he finally pulled out of me, I dropped onto my knees and crawled underneath his desk, hoping that I was hidden enough so Dad wouldn’t see me. My heart pounded inside my chest, and I tried to breathe as quietly as possible, but my body was still buzzing from his touch.

“Come in, Marcus!”

Ecstasy pumped through my body, my nipples taut. Caelan rubbed the back of his neck and took a seat at his desk, his legs spread with me between them. I gently grabbed on to his knees, my pussy still throbbing.

I couldn’t see Dad, but I could hear his footsteps enter the room. He had no idea what was going on between me and Caelan, and he would never know. Not unless Caelan finally decided to mark me one day.

But I wasn’t holding my breath.

“Can this wait until we return?” Caelan asked Dad. “I’m preparing for tomorrow.”

“Some of the elders would like to have a word before we depart.”

Desperately, I tried to even my breathing. I couldn’t let Dad hear me. It was bad enough that my scent was in the room. If he heard me here too? It’d be over. I’d be screwed. Nobody could ever know what was going on between me and Caelan.

I was supposed to hate him, and he was supposed to hate me.

But the room was seeming smaller, the air drier, more suffocating.

And Dad? Dad was too close. I could see him from underneath the desk, and if I could see him, then he could see me. My heart raced inside my chest, so loudly that I could hear it in my ears.

“Of course,” Caelan said, his voice remarkably even and calm, but I could hear the strain in it. “Send them in.”

Dad lingered for another second, and I could see the confusion on his face through the small hole underneath the desk. He had noticed something was off, that something wasn’t right, but he wasn’t one to call Caelan out on it.

No, calling Caelan out on it? That could be a death sentence. Even to him, the beta.

Another moment passed, then more people entered the room. After they exchanged formalities, the elders got right into it, and I hoped to Lycos that they would make this quick because my blood was boiling under here.

“You not being mated at this age makes us look weak, Caelan,” one said.

“We’ve seen no progress on finding you a proper mate.

Our allies watch closely, and the Whispering Pines Pack even closer.

It looks bad for us. If you don’t claim a mate soon, everyone’s going to question how strong we really are. ”

I rolled my eyes. This was one thing that I hated about wolf packs. Everyone loved

finding their mate. Hell, that was the goal for every single one of them. And I was so fed up with it, because Caelan would never choose me.

To him, to this pack, even to my own father, I was weak because I couldn't shift.

"I know," Caelan said, staying completely calm as if I wasn't raging between his thighs right now. "But we have other matters on hand right now. Once we get through the festivals and defeat the Whispering Pines, then I will choose a mate."

Red clouded my vision for a moment, but I shook my head. It didn't fucking matter anyway, because he and I both knew that he wasn't going to choose me. He wasn't going to fucking choose me, and I had to be okay with that.

But I wasn't.

While I hated the thought of mates, I was still a wolf. And my wolf craved him.

"Interested or not, you will make a decision," one of the elders said.

"Once the wedding festivals are completed, we'll make sure that there are many suitable mates for you.

There's a few from neighboring packs, or perhaps you'll find one at the wedding.

There will be many there that come from very strong bloodlines, especially that girl from the River Pack up north. "

Strong bloodlines, my ass. The River Pack was weak.

"Yes," Caelan said. "She may be a good choice."

If I could shift into my wolf, my claws would be digging into his thighs right now until he bled. Instead, my blunt little nails dug into the skin of my palms so hard that they would definitely leave little marks later. Why the fuck was he agreeing to this? With me right here?!

“The pack wants an alpha that they can rally behind,” Dad said, agreeing with the rest of them. “An alpha who can lead with stability. And a mate, especially her, will look very, very good in their eyes.”

I didn’t know why I let my feelings get involved all the time. I didn’t like Caelan like that. No, I hated him. I was using him. This was all fucking political. I hated wolves. I hated mates. I should’ve left the moment Dad convinced me to join the pack after Mom died.

“Our eastern border is weakening, and she would be a great choice to maintain peace among the packs,” another agreed. “We need strong leadership. You’re the strongest I’ve seen, and with a woman with beta-blood by your side, you’ll be unstoppable.”

Unstoppable? ... Right.

“I’ll talk with her at the wedding,” Caelan said, his expression neutral.

At the wedding?! That he was forcing me to attend?!

I gritted my teeth. If he wanted to flirt with other girls at this stupid wedding in front of me, then I could have some fun too. And I’d make sure to find someone before he found her. My goal for this stupid wedding? Make my alpha jealous.

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LIVIA

“That’s enough,” Caelan finally said. “I have to be up early tomorrow.”

I hid underneath his desk, fuming at him and the rest of the pack’s elders. I wanted them all to leave, especially him. Because once I was alone with him, I would flip the fuck out. Him with someone else? Someone fucking else?!

After biting my tongue, I balled my hands into fists so tight that my nails sliced through the skin on my palms. Caelan didn’t mean anything to me. He couldn’t. My throat closed, and I tried to swallow. I tried to calm myself down.

Because a she-wolf who couldn’t even shift was nothing to this pack.

I was nothing, and that was blatantly clear.

Caelan stood up and ushered everyone to the door, saying his last goodbyes before he left with me and Dad tomorrow morning for the Capital. I didn’t want to go, but Caelan said he wasn’t going to leave me here alone.

I’d have to dress in those frumpy ball gowns and pretend I was a wolf who could shift, one who could be strong, one who could fight. I had beta-blood running through my body after all. But right now, that blood was hot. Simmering .

What made this all worse was that I would see all those filthy little whores with their grimy little hands all over Caelan. All those royal women would want to talk to him because he was a single, hot bachelor.

Once the door finally closed, I crawled out.

“You good?” Caelan asked.

“Am I good?” I asked back, trying to stay composed, but it was harder every single fucking second I looked at him. My blood was boiling, and I could see red in my peripheral vision. “Yeah, I’m good. I’m so fucking good.”

He rolled his eyes. “Don’t start.”

“Hey, you’re the one who brought it up. All I said was that I’m good.”

“Are you seriously mad?”

“No.” I held my hands up. “I said that I was good. And I’m good.”

A long, heavy sigh left his mouth, and he ran a hand over his face. “I don’t have time for this. We have to be up in three fucking hours, Livia. Please, get some sleep. I don’t want to be carrying your ass tomorrow. It was nothing.”

“I never said it was anything,” I said, though my feet didn’t move toward the door. I glared up at him, nostrils flaring. “I said that I’m good, and I’m good. I don’t know how many times I have to repeat it for you.”

“You’re not good. I can see it on your fucking face. So don’t lie to me.”

“I’m not lying.”

“You’re lying straight to my fucking face. To your alpha.”

“Oh? You’re my alpha?”

I wanted to scream at him, because if he really was a truly strong alpha, he would've chosen me a long fucking time ago. But we both knew that wasn't going to happen. So he could fuck off.

"I have to get some sleep before we leave tomorrow," I said, hands trembling. "We have a wedding to attend, don't we? And there's gonna be a lot of single men there. Maybe I'll find a mate."

"Maybe you'll find a mate?" he snarled.

"Yeah. A strong alpha from another pack, maybe."

Another growl left his mouth, making me warm in all the places it shouldn't.

"You're going to find another fucking mate? An alpha? Good fucking luck."

"Oh? Are you good?" I asked with fake sympathy. "I didn't think that'd have much effect on you, seeing as you don't care for me as a mate, as you would rather flirt with other girls at this wedding that you're forcing me to attend."

"What the fuck do you mean? Don't play these stupid little games with me, Livia. You know you mean more to me than that."

"Hm, sure."

"Livia," he growled.

"Is me doing exactly what you were planning on doing a problem for you?"

"I was not planning on doing anything," he said between his teeth, stepping toward me. "I agreed to get them out of my office, so you didn't have to hide underneath my

desk anymore. I'm not going to fucking flirt with any other woman. Have I ever done that?"

I pressed my lips together. "Doesn't matter if you have or not."

He still refused to mate me.

"And you know what? Maybe if you were to fucking obey me, I wouldn't have a problem."

"Obey you? Lunas don't obey. They challenge. If you want someone who obeys, then you're not as strong as everyone thinks you are," I growled. "And if you're not as strong as everyone thinks you are, then this pack is going to crumble."

He exhaled and grabbed my hand. "Livia, I'm trying to protect you. If you value your freedom, maybe you'll start listening to me rather than charging into danger every single fucking time you can. Do you want your father suspecting anything?"

"Of course not," I spat out, yanking my arm free of his hold. "But don't stand there and tell me to 'obey' you. I'm not your servant. And if you think that's how this is going to go, you're in for a rude awakening."

"Watch your tone," he growled, eyes glowing. "No one else speaks to me that way."

I stomped toward the door, the blood boiling inside me. "Well, I do."

"We leave bright and early tomorrow morning," he said. "Be here in three hours, or I'll drag you out of your bed myself."

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

“Livia,” he growled. “Don’t test me.”

“No promises,” I called over my shoulder. “No freaking promises.”

Wedding this and wedding that. I didn’t want to go at all, and I hadn’t been planning on it anyway. I’d go for the politics of it all, but as soon as I had a chance to slip away, I was going to watch the games at the festival.

Not just any games, but Mortal Combat.

Because seeing two competitors fight to the death was way better than some boring wedding.

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LIVIA

“There will be several possible suitors for you who are attending the royal wedding and the games, Livia,” Dad said, calling over his shoulder five steps ahead. “I think you should get to know them a little better. Maybe you’ll meet a nice man, possibly even your mate.”

Beside him, Caelan’s jaw twitched, and I smirked. “Maybe I will.”

Caelan drew his tongue across his teeth. “Nobody good enough for her.”

“And how do you know who’s good enough for me?” I asked, crossing my arms.

“Nobody that I will allow you to mate,” he clarified, shooting me daggers with his glare.

“You don’t get to allow me to form a bond with my fated mate,” I taunted, acting like this was a totally normal conversation and nothing deeper so Dad didn’t catch on. “If I find him, who knows what will happen? Maybe I will leave this pack to be with him.”

While every muscle in his body tensed, he averted his glare to the forest in front of him and continued walking through the thicket of Dreadmire. Even though I couldn’t shift, Caelan and Dad and the warriors who were attending with us insisted on walking through the forest.

I hated it, like usual.

“She’s right,” Dad said. “If she finds a mate, then she finds a mate.”

Though I had said it, and while I expected Dad to want to dump me off to be someone else’s problem, his words still hurt. I knew I was an embarrassment to him because I couldn’t shift, and probably to Caelan as well, but Lycos ... he didn’t have to say it aloud.

“You think you can find me someone suitable?” I asked Dad.

“Yes, I will introduce you to a few once we arrive.”

I smirked so hard that I knew Caelan could feel it burning into his back. “Sounds good.”

His hand was twitching, his back muscles rippling through his shirt. “You can bring one to the wedding as a date,” he said. I raised my brows, and he continued, “I’ll be bringing one as well. I have a meeting set up with The River Pack.”

My nostrils flared, and I gritted my teeth, fuming. “Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah. Nice girl, smart and strong .”

Lycos, he knows exactly where it hurts, doesn’t he?!

“I don’t want to go to the stupid wedding,” I growled, now completely pissed off because my little fun was over. I crossed my arms and stomped after them. “Please, let me go to the games. I wanna watch the fighting.”

“You want to watch the fighting?” Dad said.

“Yes, I wanna watch.”

Caelan tilted his head just enough for me to see his pissed-off expression. “You’re not going to the games. You don’t want to watch. You want to compete, and you do not have my permission to do so.”

“I don’t need your permission.”

He cut his eyes to me. “You’re not competing.”

“Why not?”

“Because they’re dangerous.”

“Not all of them.”

“The games you want to do are.”

“How do you know that? Maybe I want to—”

“Drop it,” he snarled. “We’re a mile from the Capital. You’re to be on your best behavior here, Livia. Don’t embarrass me.”

Don’t embarrass him? Don’t fucking embarrass him? Whatever he told me, I only wanted to do the opposite. Didn’t he know that by now? If he didn’t want me to attend the games, then I would. I didn’t care which ones I would go see, I’d be there.

And maybe... I’d even think about competing too in my favorite game: Mortal Combat.

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CAELAN

“Livia’s a pretty name,” a fae said, one hand in his pocket as he leaned against the counter. He held out his opposite hand for Livia to take, and she threw me a smirk and shook it. “I’m Roger.”

It had taken us several hours of traveling through Dreadmire to arrive in Capital City, where the wedding ceremony and games were being hosted, and as soon as we fucking stepped foot into the lobby of where we’d stay... someone was already hitting on Livia.

“Well, Roger,” she giggled, really emphasizing it for me. “It’s nice to meet you.”

I balled my hands into tight fists, trying to keep my cool in front of Marcus so he wouldn’t know how much his fucking daughter affected me. We had been here for less than five minutes, and she already had someone all over her. She’d told me that she would, and I didn’t believe her.

Truly, I didn’t think she’d flirt in front of her father.

But here I fucking was: watching her and wanting to rip that motherfucker apart.

After she threw me another taunting glance with her eyes lit up like this was some sort of game, I averted my gaze to Marcus. I had to restrain myself because I couldn’t have her. She couldn’t shift, but I didn’t care about that.

What I cared about was the Whispering Pines Pack.

They had been pestering us for years now, even more since Livia had joined our pack several months ago. We had been preparing for them to attack, but they hadn't. Yet . Still, if they knew my mate couldn't shift, they'd target her .

"Was this one of the guys you were telling me about?" I asked him.

Marcus chuckled. "One of the many that will be here today."

"But him? He's a bellhop," I said, looking over at Roger, who had his finger curled around a strand of her hair, twisting it. A low growl left my mouth, and I stepped between them. "You're dismissed. I'll take care of our belongings."

Eyes widening, Roger bowed his head and scurried away.

"What the hell was that for?" Livia exclaimed behind me, glaring up at me with those pretty green eyes. She poked me hard in the chest. "Excuse me, but you and Dad agreed that I needed to find someone else."

"Not him," I said through my teeth, then lowered my voice so Marcus couldn't hear. "And I didn't agree to any of that shit."

She crossed her arms. "Well, if you can find someone else, then I can too."

"Caelan's right. You don't want a luggage boy to be your mate," Marcus said.

I nodded and stepped away because if I stayed this close to her, then I would surely lose it. My wolf had been on edge ever since we'd stepped into the capital. "You should wait until you actually find him."

"Oh yeah, I'll have to wait for him, but I think I'll be waiting forever at this rate," she said, narrowing her eyes at me. Then she scanned the room of royalty. "So I might as

well have a little fun, right?”

“You’re not going to fucking embarrass us here,” I snarled.

She shrugged. “Then you should’ve let me stay home.”

My wolf fucking begged me to let him out so he could claim her right here and right now. It had gotten harder and harder and even fucking harder the more time that passed after I met her. I didn’t know how much longer I could hold myself back.

I wanted this war with Soren from the Whispering Pines to be fucking over with so I could make her mine for once and for all.

“A quick way to get rid of me,” Livia joked, but it didn’t come off that way to me.

Someone would have to fucking kill me before Livia left my pack.

“Alpha Caelan,” someone said to my right, and my body stiffened, recognizing his scent.

Marcus squared his shoulders beside me, and I turned around to see Elijah, Soren’s son and successor to the Whispering Pines Pack once I finally killed his father. I pressed my lips together and scanned the room for Soren.

It’d be disrespectful to start shit here, but I wouldn’t put it past Soren.

“How’re you doing?” Elijah asked.

“Who’s asking?” Livia said, stepping to my side.

My nails extended into claws inside my fists. She knew who he was.

Elijah's gaze traveled from me to Livia and then lingered, his lips curling into a small smile. "Elijah. My father is Alpha Soren from the Whispering Pines Pack. And who might this cutie be?"

Livia stiffened for the slightest moment, and if she'd had any fucking sense, she'd have stepped behind me, but instead she smiled back at him. To taunt me. Then she held out her hand. "I'm Livia, Marcus's daughter."

Elijah looked from Livia to me, to Marcus, then back. "Well, Livia, I'm sure I'll be seeing you around. Maybe tonight, if you're free."

"She won't be," I said.

"Yeah," Livia said, peering up at me with those bratty eyes. "Maybe tonight."

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LIVIA

“There’s something I just can’t put my finger on,” Elijah said, placing his hand on my knee underneath the bar counter. His lips were curled into a small smile, his brown eyes glowing underneath the dim light. And if he wasn’t our enemy, I might’ve actually been interested in him.

We had been flirting for the past hour and a half over drinks. After I told Dad and Caelan that I planned on staying in tonight, I snuck down here to meet up with Elijah because I knew Caelan would follow me.

“Oh yeah?” I asked, leaning forward, my cleavage brushing against his arm.

Since I moved in with Dad several months ago after Mom died, nobody showed me any attention like this anymore. Except Caelan but he didn’t count. And part of me was dying to be wanted again.

Elijah didn’t know that I couldn’t shift, and I wasn’t sure that he would even care.

Across the restaurant, I spotted Caelan sitting at the bar by himself, his glare on me. There was a girl near him, trying to spark up a conversation. He’d say a few words to her every now and then, but he never, ever took his gaze off of me.

Warmth spread through my body, and I leaned closer to Elijah to piss Caelan off even more. While I continued to hope that one of these days I would get him to break and claim me, I highly doubted that would ever happen.

And Dad was right. I needed to find someone.

“Are you sure you’re a wolf? You’re bratty, and most wolves I know are obedient.”

“One hundred percent positive,” I hummed. “I have the blood of a beta wolf, and honestly, alphas need mates who are strong, not those who submit willingly. Don’t you think? Or are you one of those guys who gets intimidated by a woman’s strength?”

I didn’t know why I said what I said when I couldn’t even shift.

But it was fun thinking that I was strong. Maybe one day I’d be.

“Me?” he asked, chuckling. “You wish. You wouldn’t be able to handle me.”

My gaze fluttered to the bar, spotting that bitch’s arm wrapped around Caelan’s. Who the fuck was that? Why was he with her? Was it to make me jealous? Well, he had another thing coming. He didn’t know how possessive I could make him.

“Oh, I wouldn’t be able to handle you ?” I asked Elijah with a smirk.

“Nah,” he murmured, his nose buried into my hair. “I don’t think you could.”

“And why’s that?”

“You smell too innocent.”

“Too innocent?” I repeated, giving him my full attention now. “Me?”

“Mhm,” he hummed. “Unless you want to prove it to me.”

“And how do you expect me to do that?”

“We can get out of here,” he whispered into my ear. “Explore a bit.”

I sucked in a breath and swallowed hard, feeling Caelan’s gaze burn into me from across the bar. While the flirting was fun, the last thing I wanted to do was go home with the enemy, though he was really hot and felt strong.

Really strong.

In my peripheral, I saw Caelan being led out of the bar by that woman, and my blood started to fucking boil. It was sweltering inside me, pumping so hard and fast through my body that I could feel it simmering.

“You think I’m that easy?” I asked, hopping off the bar stool in an attempt to get out of here and follow Caelan as soon as I could. “Try harder, and maybe by the time this festival is over, you might have earned a night with me.”

“Why don’t you show up to the Mortal Combat games tomorrow?” he asked, grabbing my hand before I could escape him. “I’d love to see you there to show you just what I’m capable of, you brat .”

Brat?

Heat rushed through my body at the nickname, but I nodded along, my lips curled into a small smile. “I wouldn’t miss it.”

Before Elijah could keep me any longer, I ran the hell out of there and tried to trace Caelan’s scent. It was very, very faint, but it led toward our rooms. The last thing I fucking wanted was for him to disappear into his room with another woman.

I didn't think he'd dare do that, but... I had never seen him so pissed before.

If he did, though, I would fucking lose it. My legs were moving faster than my mind could keep up. And his scent was becoming stronger and stronger. I followed it until we came to the hall where our rooms were. And then I heard a door close.

I fast-walked over to it, trying to hide my scent so he couldn't smell it. But this was exactly what he wanted. He wanted me to be jealous because he was jealous. He wanted me to hurt because he was hurt.

And I didn't want to give him the satisfaction.

But dear Lycos, I needed to know if she was in there with him.

So I snuck over to the door and put my ear to it. And there was silence. Complete silence. My heart was pounding inside my chest, and I had to force myself to walk away, or else I'd barge right in there.

I sniffed the air. Once. Then twice.

Then someone's hand was on my lower back. "Looking for someone?"

I shrieked and jumped around, spotting Caelan behind me. "Lycos, you scared me!"

"What're you doing out of your room?" he asked.

"What were you doing with that bitch at the bar?"

"I'd ask you the same, but I knew you went to see him to piss me off."

I crossed my arms. "Is that what you were doing with her?"

“No, I’m not that childish.”

“You sure about that?”

A low growl left his mouth, his canines extending from his teeth. “You should be preparing your gown for tomorrow. There are several meetings you will attend with me and your father. Don’t be late to any of them.”

After gritting his teeth, he stepped into his room and slammed the door. I balled my hands into tight fists and glared at the wall.

Fuck this wedding. Fuck those meetings. And fuck Caelan.

I was going to the Mortal Combat games tomorrow instead of doing whatever he wanted me to do. And I wasn’t going to watch. No, I planned on competing.

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Source Creation Date: August 1, 2025, 7:16 am

LIVIA

“I’m gonna go grab a glass of wine,” I murmured to Dad and Caelan, walking away from them during the pre-wedding festivities. We had been attending meeting after meeting after meeting with people throughout the lands, and I hadn’t gotten time to sneak away.

Until now.

After bunching up my dress, I walked toward the bar, glancing over my shoulder every so often to make sure Caelan wasn’t watching. The Mortal Combat games had already begun, and I needed to be there three hours ago.

Once Caelan and Dad finally turned away, I jogged toward the door and slipped out of it before either of them could see me. I was wearing a stupid dress that Caelan had forced me to put on, and I was one hundred percent regretting it now.

After tearing it halfway up my thigh so I could walk—and fight—I stuffed the torn part in the trash and headed toward the games. My heart thumped loudly, my blood pumping. I hoped I hadn’t missed my chance to compete.

Outside the main building was a blur of people, talking and chatting and laughing with each other. I followed the signs for the games and found myself standing at the entrance of the arena in front of a man who looked of high importance.

“I’m Colson, Chamberlain of Pridehaven Palace. How can I help you?”

“I signed up for the Mortal Combat games last night. I want to fight.”

“What’s your name?”

“Livia. Daughter of Beta Marcus from the Whitecrown Pack.”

“Livia... Livia, Livia, Livia.” He scanned the papers in front of him, looking for my name, then he nodded. “Perfect, you’ve arrived just in time. Once you’re ready, I will lead you down to the holding cells, where you will wait for your name to be called.”

“I’m ready,” I said, straightening my shoulders.

He eyed my pink dress for a moment, his brow arching. “You’re going to fight in that?”

“Yes, I’m going to fight in this.”

I didn’t have any other change of clothes, and I wasn’t going to go buy some. Caelan had bought this stupid dress for me to wear, and I was going to wear it to do what I wanted—not to go to those stupid meetings with him.

Especially not to watch him flirt with other women either.

“That’s no problem,” he said. “Please, follow me.”

After cutting through the outer courtyard, I stayed hidden behind him, in case Caelan decided to look for me. He had been so busy talking to the other packs, flirting with their women, that I doubted he even knew I was gone.

Dad might, but... I didn’t even think he’d look for me.

Colson led me beyond the castle, to a series of narrow tunnels underneath the ground and hillside. The stone walls were damp, smelling of earth and stale air. Chains clinked throughout the tunnels and darkness, and distant voices echoed through the chambers.

“Do you know who I’m fighting?” I asked.

“Not yet, but it will be another wolf around your standing.”

Adrenaline slowly began seeping into my system. I had experience fighting against other wolves, even though I couldn’t shift, so I was confident that I could put up a fight. If I was matched against someone with magic, I wasn’t sure how I’d hold up.

“Has Elijah from the Whispering Pines Pack competed yet?” I asked.

“No.”

“Will I be able to watch him once my fight is over?”

“Yes, we have an area for competitors to watch the games. Once your fight is over, you’ll leave the arena through the exit gate and take a right at the first hallway. It’s a quick two-minute walk. Don’t worry.”

Once we descended a staircase, the room opened into a wide underground holding chamber.

Torches lined the walls, their light flickering against the darkness.

Competitors looked our way: all from different species, some young, some old, some female, some male, some who’d fight physically, others who’d fight with magic.

In the corner, warriors battled it out, practicing before they made it into the arena themselves. They threw each other against the walls so hard that they trembled. Others manipulated the vines, binding up each other's hands and feet.

"Watch yourself here," Colson said. "Not everyone respects the fortress rules. Someone might try to injure you before the games start."

Outside, I could hear the crowd cheering and howling in excitement. This was another world entirely from the wedding. Here, nobody cared about the festival. They only wanted to see the fight, the games .

All they cared about was blood and victory, about the thrill.

"You will wait here," Colson said, dropping me off in a chamber with a few other females. "There are several different games going on currently. When it's your turn, somebody will call you. Good luck."

Once he disappeared back through the crowd, I glanced over at the other young women, wondering what they were here for. Were they fighters too? Or were they participating in other games?

"You're here for the Mortal Combat games," someone said to my left, as if she already knew. She sat in the corner with a sharp claw sunk deep into her palm, the blood pooling on her skin. It was a deep crimson color and glowing.

My brows furrowed. She must... be a mage or part fae.

"How'd you know?" I asked.

She shrugged. "Just do, but you don't look like the type."

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Don’t worry about it, Livia,” she murmured.

“How do you know my name?”

A smile fluttered at her lips, and she balled her hand into a fist, the blood dripping onto the sand under her feet. “All I’m saying is that if you’re out there and need to surrender, you should. Don’t let anyone kill you.”

I narrowed my eyes at her. “You’re competing too?”

“No.”

“Then what are you doing down here?” I asked.

“Livia!” someone shouted through the holding chamber. “You’re next!”

I stood up, heart racing, and headed toward the voice, but not before I heard the girl murmur, “I’m here for you. You will need it.”

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Source Creation Date: August 1, 2025, 7:16 am

LIVIA

When I entered the arena, the green thicket of jungle from the previous match slowly disintegrated around me, leaving nothing but blood and a single corpse on the sandy ground. Spectators cheered on the victor as he departed through an exit gate to the south.

I stepped over the dead wolf, my heart pounding inside my chest.

They called these games Mortal Combat for a reason.

Sure, competitors could surrender, but most didn't. At least, that's what I heard.

The entrance gate shut behind me, and my stomach twisted into knots. Training and competing were two different sports altogether. There was no feeling equivalent to stepping into an arena with someone else who had a similar skill level as me, knowing that he, or she, was going to try to kill me.

Was this what they did back on Earth? Fought to the death?

"Next up!" the announcer roared, his voice traveling throughout the arena through his crystal tablet. "Fighting out of Dreadmire, Livia from Whitecrown Pack! She's the daughter of the pack's beta."

I swallowed hard and continued toward my designated spot, the side of the arena where the previous victor had left, clasping my hands to keep them from twitching. In the band of my thigh strap, I had stuffed a silver dagger this morning.

Usually, shifters in the Dreadmire region were severely allergic to silver, but it didn't bother me. I just had to hope—no, pray to Lycos—that whoever my opponent was, he hailed from my region too.

Because... Caelan and Dad were right. I couldn't shift.

Spectators screamed and shouted around me, the sound filling my ears with fear. I couldn't shift. For the first time in my entire life, those words seemed to finally set in. I couldn't shift, and I'd entered myself into the Mortal Combat games.

Why was I here? What was I doing? If that lower-ranked wolf could shift and still died, what was going to happen to me? And who was I going to fight? It had to be a beta wolf or stronger... maybe even an alpha.

"Also fighting out of Dreadmire," the announcer said, waiting for the cheering to start, "Elijah from the Whispering Pines Pack. He is the son of the alpha!"

When Elijah, the man who I had been flirting with last night, walked through the arena gates, everything seemed to slow. My stomach dropped, and bile burned the back of my throat. Him? I was fighting him?

I wiped my clammy hands on my bare thighs. How was I going to defeat the son of an alpha? And not just any alpha... but our enemy. What was I doing here? Why had I signed up? Did I really want to spite Caelan that much?

Elijah stretched his arms out to the audience in full confidence, tossing them one of his handsome smirks, and everyone cheered, louder than they had cheered for me. They wanted him to win.

He was the fan favorite. And I was a nobody.

“This should be a good one,” the announcer said. “These packs are sworn enemies!”

Once Elijah’s eyes finally found mine, there was a slight pause in his step, but he continued forward, heading to his designated area. I stared across the arena as it transformed from a sandy landscape into an open field with tall grass and no trees for cover.

Fuck. Fuck, I am screwed!

“Place your bets now!” the announcer shouted. “We will start momentarily.”

Elijah stared at me from across the arena, and I looked back, my heart racing inside my chest, probably so loud that he could hear it. I couldn’t believe I was doing this. How was I... how was I going to kill him?

There was no way that he would surrender, so I would. But I had to fight first, or else I’d embarrass my entire pack. I was already a disappointment because I couldn’t shift, and if I surrendered now, before the fight even started, it’d get so much worse.

“Who’s ready for another fight in the Mortal Combat games?!”

While I couldn’t see them, I could hear the crowd going wild. Elijah shifted into his ginormous wolf and howled to the moons above. I swallowed hard and waited for the announcer to officially start.

But he waited.

Everyone waited.

For me. To shift.

Instead, I pulled my silver dagger from my thigh strap and held it in front of me.

A moment passed. Then another. Then another.

Then everyone realized I wasn't going to shift.

Maybe they thought I was waiting. Maybe they thought I was cocky. Arrogant.

But I couldn't let anyone know the truth, especially Elijah.

I kept my gaze fixed on him for a couple moments, my heart racing. Would he even give me the chance to yield after a little bit of a fight? Or would he try to kill me right at the start? Our packs were enemies, but last night... he'd had a soft spot for me.

That had to mean something, right?

"Call off the match!" Caelan shouted in the crowd. "Now!"

I didn't have to see him to know that he was here. He had come. He'd found me.

How had he found me so quickly? Did he really care that much?

But there was no calling off the match when both of the opponents were already in the arena. He knew that. Everyone knew that. All I could do now was not disappoint him. At least... not disappoint him more.

I had to fight, and I had to fight hard.

"Livia," he shouted. "Step out of the arena. Yield to him as soon as the match starts!"

But I couldn't. That would embarrass him, and I always embarrassed him.

I needed to show him that I was not all that weak. That I could fight, even just a little. Then maybe he'd have respect for me. Then maybe he'd finally want to mate with me. Maybe I would be a deserving luna.

After giving me one final chance to shift into my wolf, the announcer cleared his throat. My hands tightened around the dagger until my knuckles turned white. I had to do this for him, for my pack, but mostly for me.

“Begin!”

The word had barely left his mouth before Elijah had sprinted across the arena and pounced on me.

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LIVIA

Blood filled my mouth. The open field blurred all around me. I stared up at the giant black and brown wolf above me, who had smacked me down with just his paw. My tongue swiped across my split lip, tasting iron.

Howling erupted through the arena from the crowd. Caelan's voice faintly drifted through my ears, but I couldn't make out the words he was saying. So I held my hand out in front of me and scrambled to my feet.

I couldn't die that quickly; I had... I had to prove to everyone that I wasn't weak.

I had to be faster.

When Elijah lunged at me again, I swiftly stepped out of the way and cut him twice across the back. The silver burned through his flesh, the scent seeping into my nose. He growled and turned around, his wounds healing but healing slowly.

My lungs burned, and I grasped the dagger harder. It had barely been a minute, and I had already almost passed out. I didn't know how to conserve my energy, not while I was competing, not yet.

Stars danced in my vision. I didn't care if he was the son of an alpha.

He was our pack's enemy. I had known that from the moment I saw him, and I went after him anyway. And now I'd really go after him. I'd show him. I'd show everyone. I wasn't just the weak girl from Whitecrown Pack who couldn't shift.

My name was Livia, and I could fight monsters.

His claws gleamed wet with blood, and I hadn't realized that he had caught me in the thigh until my leg gave out and I dropped to the ground. His mouth stretched wide enough that I could see his large canines.

He waited, as if he wanted me to surrender. But if I surrendered, I'd lose.

So I grasped the dagger with both hands and forced myself to stand again, earning another cheer from the crowd. Another low growl rumbled from his throat, and he stalked around me.

"Come on, alpha ," I said because I couldn't stop myself. "What are you waiting for?"

What was I doing? Taunting him?! Why'd that have to come out of my mouth?

Lycos, please, don't let me mess this up.

A single missed step, and Elijah would drag his claws across my throat, open me up, and leave me bleeding in the field. Everyone here would watch me die, including Caelan, and I... I couldn't let that happen.

When Elijah sprinted toward me, it seemed like it was happening in slow motion. I could see the wind whipping through his fur, the saliva dripping off his snout. Terror built higher and higher and higher inside me.

Once his canines sank into my lower leg, everything sped up. Thunder cracked through the sky. Crimson red filled my vision. Heat flooded through my veins. The wolf's ears suddenly flattened to his head, and he pulled his teeth out of me.

The blood began foaming in his mouth, but that didn't stop him from lunging at me again. I ducked under his swing, seized the nape of his neck in my small hand, and sank the silver dagger deep into it.

He howled to Lycos, and I snapped his spine.

A bone cracked, then the one underneath it, then all down his body. I drew my dagger around the front of his throat, listening to the bones break one after the other after the other, shattering in my embrace.

One moment he was thrashing in my arms, and the next he was dead.

Just an empty corpse.

And when my vision cleared, I realized that I had just killed the son of an alpha.

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LIVIA

Suddenly, the open field disappeared around me, replaced by the crowded arena. Nobody spoke a single word, their expressions mirroring my surprised one. I looked at the crowd, then down at Elijah's dead body at my feet.

"Livia from the Whitecrown Pack wins!" the announcer shouted over the tablet.

Yet still, nobody moved.

How did a girl who couldn't shift defeat a wolf who had the powers of an alpha? What had happened? Why had my vision turned red like that? And that heat? What was that? It didn't feel like the usual heat I had, because my fated mate hadn't marked me yet.

It didn't make sense. I didn't understand it.

I... I...

Another quiet moment passed before the arena erupted in a stunned applause, even some cheers too. I stumbled back, swaying from dizziness. That strange power had flowed right through my body, leaving just as quickly.

Blood trickled down my side, tingling against my bare skin. I clutched my thigh, each breath like a stab through the ribs. I opened and closed my mouth a handful of times. There was a body on the ground.

A body that I had killed.

Soon, it would stink like a corpse. It was a corpse.

I swallowed again and again and again, my vision focused on the wolf.

The wolf I had just killed.

“Livia!” Caelan shouted my name from the left.

My breathing quickened, reality finally setting in. What was going on? How had I done that? I had just killed a wolf. My hands shook uncontrollably. I... really, I didn’t mean... I’d thought that he would...

Someone scooped me off the ground and into their arms. I glanced up to see Caelan fast-walking to the exit of the arena, toward the gates where the last victor had disappeared less than ten minutes ago.

“Put me down,” I said, my head lolling against his shoulder. “Please, put me down. I won. I just won.”

“We need to get out of here,” he said.

“But I won. I killed him.”

So many emotions flooded through my system, I didn’t know which one I truly felt. Was it pride? Was it anguish? I had killed a man, but one who had been trying to kill me. Still, I had never killed anyone before today.

None of this made any sense. What had just happened to me?

That had never happened to any of my packmates, not even when they shifted for the first time. They didn't see red. They couldn't shatter every bone in someone's spine just by stabbing them in the neck.

The blood continued to tingle on my body, and as we exited the arena completely, I saw the corpse of that woman from the holding chamber.

She'd told me that she wasn't competing, but she was...

dead and lying at the arena's exit, her body thin.

Too thin. As if she was just skin and bones and nothing else.

"I can walk away myself," I said, shoving his shoulder. "I just won."

"I told you to stay with me," he snapped, stepping through the gate and rushing toward the borders of the property. "You were supposed to be at the wedding, but instead you were off killing the only son of an enemy alpha. Now everyone is going to be after us."

My stomach twisted. He was right, but I...

"But I survived. Aren't you happy that I survived? And you didn't protect me this time."

"Livia, you have no fucking idea the war you just caused."

"These were official games. The Whispering Pines Pack has no reason to—"

"Yes, they do," he said, running straight for the woods.

We weren't going back to the wedding. Nor to our rooms. Nor to the crowd.

No, he was taking me home.

"I didn't even need my wolf. You always say that I need my wolf to protect me, but I don't. I can be strong for you, for our pack, for my dad, for myself. Everyone will finally respect me for this."

I didn't even know what I was saying anymore, but the words were flying out of my mouth. I was trying to reason with him, and myself, about why this was a good thing. But I had just killed someone.

Killed them!

"Is that why you don't mate with me?" I continued on, because it was easier than saying that I had killed someone aloud. "Because I don't have a wolf? Do you want somebody to stand beside you in wolf form too, so you can run with them? Is that why you?—"

The wind whipped through my hair.

"Listen to me," he growled, heading onto a path that hadn't brought us here. "Whether you shifted or not, you won. But at what cost? They're going to be after you now. Everyone is going to be after you. You killed the son of an alpha. I don't think you understand that."

"And if he had won," I said, "he would've killed the mate of an alpha."

A long silence dragged on between us as the greenery began bending in all shapes and sizes, the vines growing thicker and more hairy. The scent of woods turned into a dense scent of rain and smog.

“We need to get out of here right now,” he said, instead of addressing the issue at hand. “If the Whispering Pines Pack finds us out here alone, they will kill us. We need to return home as quickly as possible without them tracking us.”

“Why would they kill me? It’s a game! This is what’s supposed to happen!”

“They’ll kill you because they don’t play fair. Don’t you fucking understand?”

“Well, don’t you think—”

Before I could finish my sentence, several rogues suddenly leapt out from behind the trees, and we were surrounded on all sides.

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LIVIA

Claws slashed through the air, ripping through flesh. In a blur, Caelan tore through the first rogue, snapping one arm, then the other, then tore his ribs right out of his body with his canines. The sound of his cartilage cracking echoed through the forest.

My eyes widened at the glowing crimson blood pooling around him.

Terror built higher and higher and higher inside me, and red clouded my vision for a mere moment. What... What was that? I almost felt like I had right before I killed Elijah in the arena barely twenty minutes ago.

When the second rogue slashed at Caelan's throat, he ducked low, grabbed his paw with his hand without even shifting, and snapped it. A sickening crunch jolted through my ears, and I squeezed my eyes closed, remembering what it had felt like to shatter Elijah's spine.

I swallowed hard and stumbled back against a tree.

The third rogue hesitated, his eyes wide, but it was too late. Caelan lunged at him, balled his hands into a tight fist, and hit him so hard it indented his skull. My eyes widened. I had always known that he was strong, but I had never seen him fight.

No, they never let me go into war, nor into battle.

When the corpse hit the ground, I fell to my knees.

The blood... all of that blood was glowing... dripping through the dirt.

I stared at it for a few moments, my vision blurring once more, then I shook my head.

I didn't know why my body was reacting this way. I wanted to go home, to pray to Lycos that this was all some sort of sick dream. I didn't want to kill anyone, and now... this feeling... it wasn't going away.

A layer of sweat covered Caelan's muscles. His chest rose and fell deeply, his eyes scanning the forest for any more. Gold flecks danced in his irises, his wolf slowly emerging. But for some reason, he kept him down.

My mate was so powerful.

Suddenly, another rogue leapt from the shadows toward me.

I whimpered and tried to make myself as small as possible because I didn't want to feel like this anymore.

But before he could land on me, Caelan spun, caught him mid-pounce, and twisted his entire body until each bone in his spine snapped loudly.

I shivered as he landed beside me.

"He's already called for your head," Caelan said.

"Who?"

"Alpha Soren of the Whispering Pines Pack."

My heart raced inside my chest, so loudly that I could hear it in my ears. I opened and

closed my mouth a handful of times. Was that why they were suddenly attacking us? Was it true? Had they been sent by Alpha Soren?

“Are you okay?” Caelan asked, his chest rising and falling quickly.

I stared down at the three rogues; no, the three dead corpses. Red streaks covered the forest around us, smearing across the trees and leaves and even his forearms. I blinked a few times, hoping this feeling would disappear.

“I’m fine,” I said.

He moved his gaze down my body, assessing. Possessive. Then his jaw twitched.

“I’m fine,” I said again, trying to assure myself.

But my throat was dry, and that blood... it was still glowing in my peripheral vision.

Before either of us could say another word, more heavy feet pounded against the forest floor. My stomach dropped. A few dozen figures slid into view about a mile to our north. Some were rogues. Some warriors from the Whispering Pines.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered to Caelan, hiding behind him. “I’m so sorry. This is my fault.”

He squared his shoulders, his claws extending. “Stay behind me. Don’t move.”

My pulse raced. “There are way too many. You can’t take them all.”

“Yes, I can.”

Caelan shifted into his huge black wolf, nearly twice the size that Elijah was, his eyes

a glowing gold underneath the forest's canopy. I sucked in a sharp breath and stood up, staying behind him, yet my heart hammered against my bruised ribs.

We were outnumbered.

There was no way he could defeat them all because I wouldn't be of any help.

I didn't know how I had used that power earlier. And I wouldn't know how to do it again.

"Stay on your feet," he howled.

A loud roar echoed through the forest, and suddenly they were all running at us. I swallowed hard and stared at them, my vision blurring with red. Thunder cracked through the sky again, and the moons above almost pulsed in perfect rhythm with my heartbeat.

Heat washed through my veins, and my knees buckled yet again. Caelan stood in front of me, scanning the forest to make a game plan, deciding how to react. But I couldn't let him die. No, I needed to do something.

I needed to help.

The air tasted like blood. I pressed a shaky hand to the ground, and the blood from the three dead rogues drifted into my palm, slipping through my wound and into my body. I squeezed my eyes closed, unable to stand upright.

Roars and growls echoed through the forest, rattling my bones. I placed another hand on the ground, and something deep inside me stirred. It was something I'd never felt before, not even during the battle at the arena.

Pressure built underneath my skin, in my blood, in my bones.

Before one of the rogues or wolves could touch Caelan, a shriek left my mouth and echoed through the entire forest. The wolves stopped immediately. The first line of them fell to the ground, their blood splattering everywhere.

The others looked at them, then at me, and then they ran away in the opposite direction.

All the pressure inside of me suddenly exploded, and I fell to the ground, unable to stand. My head was spinning, the blood pulsing inside me. Caelan shifted back into his human form and dropped to his knees, gathering me in his arms.

“Are you okay?” he asked urgently.

“Yes,” I breathed.

“What happened?”

“I... I don’t know. Everything is hot, boiling. My blood...”

I didn’t know how to continue.

None of this made any sense. But I needed to sleep. I needed something.

“Rest, little mate. I’m here to protect you.”

LIVIA

After several hours of walking, we stumbled across a cabin nestled deep in the forest between a web of trees. The forest was so dense around these parts that not even the moonlight could guide us anymore.

“We need a place to sleep,” I said to Caelan.

“What we need is to get home.”

“My eyes are sleepy.”

A low growl left his mouth, and he eyed the cabin lit with candles out front. “Come on.”

“We’re just going to knock on someone’s door and—”

Before I could finish my sentence, he was doing exactly that—knocking on their door with me right by his side. His hand was wrapped tightly around my wrist, not even my hand, and his skin... it was feeling so warm against mine.

The door opened after the third knock, and a woman with gray coiled hair appeared behind it, a red mole on her cheek. Another woman peered over her shoulder, staring at us curiously. “Can we help you?”

“We’re travelers and need a place to sleep tonight,” he said. “Would you happen to have an extra room?”

Instead of eyeing down Caelan, the women were scanning me. They shared a glance, then peered back at me, scrunching their brows as if they were having a silent conversation. Could they converse without speaking? They did look like they had some kind of power.

“We do have one extra room,” the woman with the red mole said.

I scrunched my nose and looked over at Caelan. “I don’t wanna share with you.”

“Well, that’s too bad,” he said between his teeth, voice low enough so only I could hear it. He flashed them a smile. “That would be so great. Thank you.”

The women stared at me again, then shared another look.

While they let us into their cabin, I couldn’t help but notice the sideways glances they threw me the entire time that they led us to the spare room. Something was up, and I couldn’t put my finger on it.

“Is there something I can help you with?” I asked.

“What’s your mother’s name?” one of them asked.

“My mom? I don’t think you’d know her. She’s dead.”

“What’s her name?” the red mole woman asked.

“Her name was Luna.”

They both shared another look, eyes widening.

“It is her,” one said to the other.

“Did you know her?” I asked, brows furrowing.

They both grinned at me, then the one with the mole said, “Oh yes, yes. We’ve known her for a long, long, long time. Since she was a child.”

My eyes widened. “You knew my mom? How?”

“Oh dear, that’s a story for another time.

” They scurried to the door. “It’s getting quite late.

You both should rest. We’ll keep an eye out and ensure that nobody finds our cabin for the night, especially the wolves from the Whispering Pines Pack.

If you need anything, I’m Esma, and this is Circe. ”

“Thank you,” Caelan said, shutting the door behind them.

But neither of us had said a word to them about the Whispering Pines Pack.

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Source Creation Date: August 1, 2025, 7:16 am

LIVIA

“You’re so fucking annoying,” I whisper-yelled at Caelan the next morning.

We had shared that stupid bed all night with his body pressed up against mine, his breath on my neck, his cock on my ass. And then he had to make some stupid, smart-ass comment about how this was all my fault.

And he wasn’t talking about how turned on he was in the morning because of me.

No, he just had to bring up the games. Again.

“ I’m annoying?” he asked, pants hanging low enough on his hips for me to see his carved v-line. “I’m the one that’s annoying? Every single fucking day you do something that I tell you not to do. You?—”

I poked him hard in the chest. “You should be happy that I defeated Elijah without ever shifting into my wolf. It shouldn’t matter if I can or not. Me using only my fighting abilities has made our pack look strong.”

He growled. “It’s made you look weak.”

“It has not.”

“It’s made our pack look weak.”

“It has not!”

He snatched my chin in his large hand. “And I’m going to punish you for it.”

Warmth suddenly exploded through me, yet I wasn’t submitting that easily. “Oh yeah? And how are you gonna do that?”

“Don’t fucking test me,” he said, jaw twitching.

“I don’t think you have it in you.” I crossed my arms. “What if my dad finds out?”

“I don’t give a fuck if he does or not.” His eyes glowed. “You deserve to be punished.”

“You’re not going to do shi—” I started.

But before I could finish my sentence, he snapped his hand around my neck and pinned me to the wall, his body flush against mine, his hard cock on my stomach, and his canines lengthening. “Oh, I’m not gonna do shit?”

“No,” I said between gritted teeth, the air quickly leaving my body. I glared up at him through my lashes. “You’re not going to do?—”

Suddenly, I was on my knees, staring up at him again, but this time from farther down. With one hand laced in my hair, he undid the button on his pants with his other, yanking them off and pulling out his hard, thick cock.

I sucked in a breath and glared up at him, refusing. I knew what he wanted, and I wasn’t going to give it to him. Fuck no. If he wanted to punish me, then I could punish his ass right back.

“Open your mouth,” he commanded, using his alpha tone.

But I pressed my lips together. I wasn't going to give it to him. I couldn't give it to him.

“Open your fucking mouth or I'll do it for you.”

When I didn't respond, he squeezed my nose closed. I glared up at him, warmth flooding across my cheeks. If I didn't open soon, I'd pass out. And my body wouldn't let that happen. I'd be forced to open my mouth, and I didn't want to.

No, actually. I wanted to, but I didn't want to give him the satisfaction of knowing how much. Because if he wanted to go around flirting with other girls, then I'd show him what he was missing. But not before he forced me to.

“You're going to open up for me, or I'm going to make you. There's no fucking getting out of this, Livia.” He harshly drew his thumb across my lips, his eyes glowing. “I fucking own you. You're mine.”

“Says the guy who planned to find himself another mate at the wedding—”

As the last words left my mouth, he shoved his fat cock between my lips, stuffing me full. My eyes widened, tears pricking at the corners of them, and I stared up at him, knowing that I had made a mistake.

He hadn't forced me to do anything. My bratty ass couldn't keep my mouth shut.

And he fucking knew I wouldn't be able to. He knew I'd give in.

Lycos, I fucking hate him for that.

“Good fucking girl, for once.”

“Fuck you,” I growled up at him, my words muffled.

“That’s it, little mate. Gargle on that cock.” He shoved more and more of himself down inside me, filling my throat until my lips met the base. “This is your fucking punishment. You deserve it.”

I swallowed around him, over and over and over, trying to get air. But he didn’t pull out. No, he fucking shoved himself as deep as he could go and wrapped his hand around the front of my throat. One hand on my throat, the other laced in my hair on top of my head, he pulled me closer, somehow.

Warmth exploded through my pussy. I dug my nails into his thighs, trying to push him away, but he didn’t move. The tears almost spilled down my cheeks now as I glared up at him, cursing as much as I could, but it all came out in a garbled mess.

Spit dripped down my chin and onto my tits.

“You wanna fucking talk to another guy? This is what you fucking get,” Caelan snarled, pounding into my throat. “I don’t give a fuck that you were in that fight yesterday. This punishment is for flirting with him.”

The jealousy poured out of him, and fuck, it was so hot.

So that’s what he was really pissed about. The fighting might’ve been part of it, and that’s what he’d tell everyone else too, but he was furious that I’d flirted with Elijah in front of him. He was furious that he’d had to watch, to hear, to feel how turned on he had made me.

For him to actually sound like he actually gave a fuck about me for once.

I knew that we would never amount to anything. He’d never claim me publicly as his

own, he'd never mark me. But at least this was something. As little as it was, it satisfied something inside me.

Was it my wolf? I would never know because I had never seen her—barely ever felt her. But it was something. Lycos, it was fucking something feral.

He pumped my head back and forth on his huge cock, forcing me to take it over and over and over again. Strands of spit drifted from his shaft to my lips, and then even more down to my tits, covering me, drenching me.

I wrapped my arms around the backs of his legs.

He wanted this to be a punishment, and I was going to show him that it wasn't.

This was what I fucking craved. And if he wanted it to be a punishment, he would have to do something worse, like force me to take him and not let me come. Over and over and over and over again.

My pussy was so fucking soaked, clenching hard around nothing. I bobbed my head back and forth, and back and forth, all the way from the tip of his cock to the base, and stared up at him, the tears falling down my cheeks now, but I didn't fucking stop.

I choked on it. I gagged on it. But I kept on it, over and over and over.

Gags and spit and gargle left my mouth. He clenched his jaw, everything in him tensing. His canine teeth extended far past his lips, and all I wanted to do was have them deep inside my neck, claiming me.

So I continued. Harder, faster, deeper.

He couldn't fucking take it. No, he would break soon.

I would break him. Not another girl. Me.

I took every single inch of his dick deep in my throat and stilled, my lips pressed against his base. My eyes fixed on his. Then I wrapped my hand around my throat and traced his dick inside of it. Back and forth, up and down, staring up at him, tears racing down my cheeks.

I stroked him—once, twice—and then his cum shot down the back of my throat.

I coughed and gagged on it and continued.

Sucking and sucking and sucking and fucking sucking it out of him.

His hips twitched, but I had my arms wrapped tightly around the backs of his legs, so he wasn't going anywhere. I was going to take him. Until he forced me back.

He wanted to get pissed that I was with another guy when he was with another girl?

Fuck that. He thought he had all the control, but I did. I always did.

When he finally pulled away, I swallowed every last drop of him. His cock smacked against his thigh with a thud, still half hard. I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand and stood up.

“You don't own me, Alpha . I own you.” I grabbed my clothes and headed straight for the door, heat beginning to flood through my body. “I have since the moment we met.”

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LIVIA

While I didn't know where I was going, I needed to get out of here, because he never liked to be around me during my heat. He knew he didn't have the self-control to stay away around me. His wolf would want to satisfy his mate, to stop the heat, the pain.

And the only way to do that was with a mark.

"You're not going anywhere," he growled, grabbing my wrist and tugging me back.

"Yes, I am."

He shoved me back onto the bed and stood between my thighs, his muscles straining as the sunlight streamed in through the window. Before I could get up again, he crawled onto the bed with me, between my thighs, and suddenly buried his face between them.

The heat grew even hotter, sweat forming at the base of my neck.

Oh, no. If I don't get out of here soon...

After resting my legs on his shoulders, he placed his wet mouth on my clit. My hips jerked into the air, the pleasure flooding through me already. He fastened his lips onto my clit and drew his tongue across it over and over and over again.

I grasped the bedsheets in my fist, trying not to make a sound. I didn't want anyone to hear me, especially Esma and Circe. They had allowed us to stay here with them, and

I didn't want to be a nuisance.

Though... I was sure they'd heard Caelan face-fucking me moments ago, and the pleasure was building and building and building inside of me.

"My little mate," he growled, "you're not leaving here until you come too."

Little mate... That jealousy... The possessiveness...

He had never let his wolf take this much control so close to my heat.

He shoved one of his fingers inside me, and I clenched around them. They were so, so big. A small, soft moan left my lips, and I bucked my hips back and forth, finding a rhythm with his mouth. He stared up at me, his eyes glowing gold. Pressure built higher inside me, and I furrowed my brows.

"Alpha..." I whispered breathily.

"Quiet, little mate. Wouldn't wanna wake anyone."

All of his anger was gone, and now I could finally see the alpha, my mate. While I was sure he was still pissed that I'd gone on a date with Elijah and then enrolled myself in the games without telling him, all it seemed like he wanted right now... was to make me come.

"You're going to come for me," he murmured, finding my g-spot and massaging it. "You're going to come around your alpha's fingers on his command. Do you understand? No bratting. No fighting. You'll come when I say so."

The pressure built higher, and I clenched even harder as he inserted another finger.

“Please,” I whimpered. “Please, I’m so close.”

“Say you understand.”

I nodded, the heat coursing through me. “I understand... I understand. Please, can I?”

“No.”

He flicked my clit with his tongue, rolling it around in circles, his fingers moving in a come-hither motion against my g-spot. My head lolled back, my nipples aching and hard underneath my shirt.

“Lycos, please...”

“No.”

The pressure rose higher, and I didn’t know how much longer I could take this.

“Please!” I cried. “Please, I need to—”

“Come for me.”

As soon as the words left his mouth, I came undone around him. Wave after wave of pleasure pumped through my body, my pussy pulsing wildly around his fingers. I gripped the bedsheets hard and yanked up on them, nearly tearing them apart.

“Oh my f-f-fucking L-L-Lycos,” I breathed out. “Fuck!”

“You’re mine,” he growled between my legs. “Say it.”

“I’m yours,” I said, the pleasure continuing. “I’m yours. I’m all yours.”

“You belong to me.”

“Yes, yes, I belong to you.”

“I own you.”

“Yes, Lycos, you own me, Caelan. You own me, my mouth, my pussy. Every part of me, you own,” I whimpered. “I belong to you. I’m yours.”

Source Creation Date: August 1, 2025, 7:16 am

LIVIA

After Caelan finished with me, I pulled the blankets up to my chin and stared up at the ceiling, my eyes filling with tears. All the emotions from the past few days seem to hit me at once, and I... I didn't know what to do with it anymore.

I had never killed anyone before, but the sound of Elijah's spine shattering in my hands wouldn't stop replaying through my mind. Every time I closed my fucking eyes, I saw his corpse. I could feel the life leave his body.

Bile rose in my throat, and I bit back a sob.

Lycos, what is wrong with me?! Wolves kill others all the time, and I'm getting caught up on this one single death that he had consented to?

"What's wrong?" Caelan asked, his voice distant but his body close.

"It's nothing," I said, turning over so he wouldn't see my tears.

"What is it?" he asked again, wrapping his arm around my waist.

"It's nothing."

The chaos from earlier today and the pleasure from being with him had worn off, and now I had to lie here, thinking about what I had done. How I had killed someone. Murdered them. Slaughtered them.

A tear slid down my cheek. How could I do that? Sure, I'd entered that fight knowing that I could possibly kill someone if they didn't surrender. But I'd thought they would. Why would they want to die?

If anything, I wanted to.

When the thought that I had been holding back since Mom died drifted through my head, a sob cracked through my throat. All this time, Dad had acted like he didn't want me. Nobody in this fucking pack watched me. And the only person I cared about was dead.

But I should be the one dead. I shouldn't have survived the games.

"Livia, what's wrong?" he murmured against my ear, pulling me closer. "Tell me."

"It's nothing!" I shouted, turning over to face him, but tears were flooding down my cheeks. I slammed my hands into his chest, yet my fingers curled into the muscle, both wanting him farther away and closer. "Can't you see that I'm fine?!"

His hard expression turned softer for a moment, his brows furrowing just enough. He reached out and placed a hand over mine, running his thumb across my knuckles. "You can talk to me."

"No, I can't. You don't care. You don't like me. You just wanna use me."

After a moment of him looking like he was trying to restrain himself, probably from saying yes, he took a deep breath. "Tell me what's wrong," he said again, this time in his alpha-tone.

Usually, I could ignore his alpha commands, but I found myself opening my mouth.

“I...” My voice broke. “I killed someone.”

He pushed some hair off my forehead. “He was going to kill you.”

I shook my head. “That doesn’t make it right. I killed someone.”

“I know,” he murmured, lacing a hand into my hair and pulling me to his chest. “I know. I’m sorry. I tried to stop it, but I could’ve tried harder. I should’ve known you were gone sooner than I did. I’m sorry. I should’ve protected you.”

Tears streamed down my cheeks. I didn’t know why he was being so nice to me right now. He never showed any emotion other than lust, not outwardly, not explicitly. And now? Now I was getting softness from him?

I sobbed and I sobbed and I sobbed for a long time until there were no more tears left.

How could this be normal? How could wolves just kill each other without remorse?

Mom had raised me to be so kind, to live a quiet life in the trees, to love others even when they didn’t love me.

And to be thrust into this life seven months ago with Dad telling me that this was how he lived, that this was how I needed to learn to live too?

I... I couldn’t understand it. I didn’t want to kill anyone ever again.

“What was that power?” Caelan finally asked.

“It was my wolf,” I said without hesitation.

“No,” he said. “It’s not your wolf.”

“It has to be.”

“Those powers do not come from our pack,” he said. “I’ve never seen them before.”

“Then... what is it?”

He drew his tongue across his teeth and shook his head. “I don’t know.”

My entire body stiffened in his arms. “But I’m a wolf.”

“Are you?” he asked.

While Mom might’ve raised me my entire life, she had always told me about Dad and his pack, always told me that I’d transform into a wolf one day. I had been a wolf since the moment I was born, and we had a mate bond to prove it.

Fury built up inside me, and I shoved my hands into his chest and found myself racing across the room to pick up my clothes to put them back on. I didn’t know why his words hurt so much, but... but maybe it was because...

“You know I’m a wolf,” I said. “You feel the bond too. I know you do.”

He sat up and leaned against the headboard, running a hand through his hair. “Livia, I do, but—”

“But we can never be together. Blah, blah, blah. I know that, you stupid fucking—”

“But we need to figure this out,” he said, suddenly out of the bed and at my side. He grabbed my hands and forced me to look up into those golden brown eyes. “Because if we don’t, then you’re going to get yourself killed.”

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LIVIA

“Get up, Livia,” Caelan said from the edge of the bed. “We have to go.”

I slowly blinked my eyes open and held an arm up to block the blaring light. It must’ve been midday at the latest, and while we probably should’ve left hours ago, I didn’t know if I had the energy in me to make the trek today. My entire body was aching, my mind like mush.

“Please, another hour,” I whimpered. “Everything hurts.”

“No,” he said, yanking the blankets off me. “We have to go.”

The heat still lingered deep inside me, but at least it wasn’t as bad as last night. So I slipped out of bed, tugged on some clothes that those witches must’ve left for me on the nightstand, and followed Caelan toward the kitchen.

Esma and Circe sat at the dark wooden table, their kitchen decorated with purple and black books written in languages that I couldn’t read, vials filled with red potions, and herbs scattered across the counters.

“We appreciate you allowing us to stay the night,” Caelan said. “But we must go.”

“So soon?” Esma asked, her hand wrapped around a steaming mug.

“Yes.”

“I hoped that you’d stay a little longer. I think we can help.”

“Help?” I asked, furrowing my brows. “With what?”

After sharing a look with Esma, Circe offered me a small smile. "Your mom... she was different. We can't tell you how; that's something you have to learn on your own. But we might be able to help you."

Caelan stared at them for a few moments, then took my hand. "We can't stay. I have to return home to protect my pack. I'm sure we're already under attack by the Whispering Pines Pack. They need me there."

"We understand," Esma said. "But we'll be here whenever you need it."

I pulled my hand out of his. "I want to stay."

He hardened his eyes at me. "You're not staying."

"Why not? This is the first time that I... could possibly be of any help."

Canines lengthened, he drew his tongue across them the way he always did when he was angry, then he captured my hand again, tugging me toward the door. "You're not staying. I need to go."

"All this time I've felt like shit because I couldn't shift, because you didn't want me, because Dad didn't want me. Nobody wanted me!" I shoved him toward the door, nostrils flaring and anger pumping through me. "And now I have power, and you don't want to let me see it."

"That's not the reason," he said, gritting his teeth and leaning in closer so only I could hear him. "And you know that's not true. You're a member of our pack, and it's my

job to protect you, no matter what. And that's what I'm doing right now. I don't trust them."

I crossed my arms. "You trusted them enough to let us stay the night."

"Livia, I need to get home to protect our pack."

"Then let me stay here by myself."

"No," he growled, the sound echoing throughout the room. It wasn't him anymore—it was his wolf. Flecks of gold flickered inside his irises, and he snatched my hand even tighter. "I'm not leaving you here alone."

"But—"

"But nothing. I make the decision for you. We're leaving. Now."

"We understand that you have to go," Esma said, finally speaking up. She looked over at Circe, who nodded as if they were sharing a thought. "But... we have something for you before you leave."

Circe opened one of the kitchen drawers and pulled out a necklace with a pendant hanging off the chain. "This was your mom's when we knew her, and now it's yours, Livia. She'd want you to have it."

I took it in my hands and stared down at the design: a circular pendant with winding indents that carved an intricate maze-like pattern into the metal. I had vaguely remembered seeing this somewhere before, but I couldn't remember exactly. It must've been years ago, when I was just a child.

"Thank you," I said, clasping it in my hands. "Thank you so much."

Caelan growled by the door. "Livia, it's time to go."

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Source Creation Date: August 1, 2025, 7:16 am

LIVIA

“How long until we get home?” I asked, trailing after Caelan.

We had been walking through the woods for an hour now, and I swear he had to be lost. None of this looked familiar.

“Probably twice as long as it took to get to the fucking wedding.”

“Do you even know where we are?”

He turned around, his brown eyes hard. “I’m not in the fucking mood right now, Livia.”

“Why are you so mad?” I said, crossing my arms.

“Because,” he said through clenched teeth.

I flared my nostrils and stopped, narrowing my eyes at him. “Oh yeah, that really answers my question. If you didn’t wanna deal with me, then you should’ve left me there. It’s not my fault you’re lost.”

“For the thousandth fucking time, I’m not lost.”

“Says every guy ever when they’re lost.”

After snarling at me, he turned back around and continued walking through the forest.

I let him get a way ahead, then hurried after him because I didn't want to be left alone. I probably would've been able to get back to the cabin myself, but I wasn't gonna test it right now.

"I wasn't going to leave you there alone. You're my mate."

"Well, it doesn't feel like that. You don't even wanna mark me."

"I want to mark you, but I can't."

"Yeah, yeah. You're trying to protect me, or something like that, huh?" I hummed in annoyance because that's what he always said and waved him off. "Doesn't matter anyway, because you don't want anyone to know that we're mates."

"Neither do you."

I glared at the way his back muscles flexed underneath his shirt, nostrils flared.

I hate him. I fucking hate him.

"I wanna learn my magic," I said.

"We don't even know if it's magic," he said through his teeth.

"Do you not want me to be strong? I can't shift into my wolf?—"

Before I could finish my sentence, he growled. "Of course, you can't shift into your wolf. I've known that since I met you. You can't protect yourself regularly against threats. Who the fuck knows what happened in that arena. You—"

"Is that what it is?" I asked, finally stating it out loud. "You don't want to be mated to

somebody who can't shift?"

"No, that's not what it is. I'm trying to protect you."

"No, you're not. If you wanted to protect me, then you would've left me with those witches so I'd learn magic."

"I don't know who the fuck they are. And the fact that they knew your mother, when they had never met you? I don't trust them. I'm not gonna leave you with random people while you're being targeted by the Whispering Pine. They want to fucking kill you. Do you not understand?"

I stopped, flared my nostrils, and snapped my mouth closed. He was right, but I didn't want to admit it aloud. His ego was already too big, and at this point, I just wanted to get home so I could sleep in my own bed and not have to share again with him.

"Come on, Livia. We don't have all fucking week to return home. Our pack is probably being attacked by the Whispering Pine and rogues, if we haven't been wiped out completely already."

"Well, I'm fucking sorry," I growled. "Forgive me for enrolling in the games."

"I'm not gonna fucking forgive you. You were supposed to be at the wedding."

"Well, I wasn't."

Another low growl left his mouth. "Do you think—"

Suddenly, a low roar echoed through the dark forest, and a rogue lunged in our direction. His claws slashed through my thigh, and I cried out in pain, the blood

oozing from my wound. Caelan was on him in a millisecond, already ripping out his throat.

Another rogue ran over, then another, then another, and then we were surrounded again, like we had been before we reached the witches' cabin. My heart thumped in my chest, and I desperately tried to remember how I'd done magic earlier.

If I could save us, maybe I could prove to him that I could use it, that my powers were real, and that I could protect myself and the pack. But how... how had I done it? How did I summon the magic before?

I wasn't sure. It seemed to... to happen naturally.

With my back pressed against Caelan's to protect his rear, I counted the rogues around us. Five, six, maybe as many as eight or nine. And all of them were staring at me, their canines dripping with saliva.

They looked wilder than the others, in more of a daze.

"Stay close to me, little mate," Caelan—or should I say his wolf—whispered over his shoulder. My heart leapt in my chest from the new nickname his wolf had given me, but this was not the time! Though the heat was building between my thighs once more, growing hotter.

The rogues leapt in all directions toward me. He slashed their throats over and over before they could even touch me again until he was covered with blood.

I tried to summon my magic, but it didn't work. I didn't know how. I wanted to. I wanted to help in some way that I could. But I had never been able to. Maybe he was right... maybe this all was a fluke. Maybe something else was happening, and I really didn't have magic.

I wiped sweat off my forehead. Was it getting hot in this forest? Or was it just me?

Lycos, it is really hot.

Blood soaked through my shirt, and I pulled it off my body. So hot. So, so hot. Why was it so hot? It had to be my heat, back again, torturing me for not completing the mating bond back at the cabin.

When Caelan killed the final wolf, he looked over at me, his eyes glowing completely gold. “Don’t do this to me, little mate. You know I can’t control myself around you.”

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LIVIA

“You can’t be going through this right now,” Caelan said, seizing a bit of control from his wolf, his eyes continually shifting between brown and gold. “We just finished with the rogues. There could be more waiting for us around these parts. If you don’t control yourself...”

“Little mate,” I said, finishing his sentence.

His eyes glowed gold. “ Little mate .”

“Lycos... I love when you call me that,” I whispered.

He shook his head again, regaining control. “Livia, control yourself.”

“Maybe that’s why the rogues were chasing us,” I offered. “They could smell me.”

After inhaling sharply, smelling my arousal, my heat , he growled softly. “You know that’s not why they were chasing us. They were sent by the Whispering Pines Pack to kill you, and I need to get us home in one piece.”

I swallowed hard, and the heat continued to swell inside of me. While I tried hard to control it, I couldn’t stop staring at him: the way he moved, how the wind blew his hair just slightly, his scruff...

Lycos, he is so fucking sexy.

“Livia,” he growled through his canines. “Control yourself. Now.”

“I’m trying,” I whimpered. “But... but I can’t.”

“You must.”

I sucked in a short breath, my breathing becoming ragged. “Or what? What’s going to happen? What are you gonna do about it?” I taunted. “You know the only way to solve this is to mark me, to claim me, to make good on your nickname for me. Little mate. ”

“Livia,” he said again, barely able to get my name out of his mouth.

“I’m really hot,” I whispered, sweat now covering my body.

The forest around us was empty, and we had nobody else to chase us.

“We’re alone, and I’m so hot,” I whined desperately. I stopped at a tree and curled my fingers against the bark. If I had claws, they would dig right into it. But my dull little nails didn’t do anything.

“Livia, we must continue moving,” he said, not looking back at me.

I held out an arm and stared at the dirt. “I’m so hot. I can’t.”

My core was throbbing, and I knew that if I looked at him again, I might do something that I’d regret. That we’d both regret. I had been so confused lately. I didn’t know if he wanted me or if he didn’t.

If he wanted me out of his hair, he should’ve let me die in that arena. But he hadn’t. He’d dragged me out of there and protected me multiple times since then. But... I had

gone through heat so many times, and he still didn't want to mark me.

And now? Now I was being punished for it.

I had to go through heat. Again . This time worse.

And he didn't.

"This would be so much easier if someone marked me. Anyone ."

A ferocious growl left his mouth. "Don't say that."

"It's true," I murmured. "If you won't... someone will eventually."

"Livia," he snarled. "You know that I can't."

"If you're not gonna mark me, you should reject me so this heat will be over with."

He snapped his head toward me, saliva dripping from his canines, his eyes a golden fire. "Don't you ever fucking say that again."

"I mean it," I pushed. "Reject me or mark me."

The heat coursed through my body, making me sweat all over. I grasped onto the tree harder, my knees trembling and my eyes burning. "Please. I need something," I pleaded. "What can I do?"

"It will pass by dawn."

"I can't wait that long. It hurts. Badly. It feels like my skin is too tight, like it's burning."

He took another step closer, then another until I stared up at him through glossy eyes.

“Don’t look at me like that,” he growled.

“Like what?”

He drew his tongue across his canines, another growl leaving his mouth. “Like you want my hands everywhere.”

“I fucking need it,” I breathed.

“If I touch you while you’re in heat, I won’t be able to stop.”

“Then don’t stop,” I murmured, grabbing his hands. “Please.”

His eyes shifted between brown and gold, finally settling on brown. “Breathe,” he murmured softly, the word drifting into my ear. He closed his eyes. “Breathe for me, Livia. Slowly. It will pass, and I will mark you when the time is right.”

“It will never be right for you,” I said, unable to breathe steadily.

“Yes, it will,” he said, his hand twitching as if he wanted to touch me.

“Every fucking instinct that I have is screaming at me to help you. But you know that I can’t do that.

You’re in heat right now, and when I take you...

it’s going to be when you have all your senses, when this war is over, when we’re both safe. ”

CAELAN

When we arrived home, the pack was worse than I thought it would be. Several of my pack members had been killed overnight by paid rogues and the Whispering Pines Pack, even some at the border, which allowed others to sneak in and kill more.

I ran my tongue across my canines and balled my hands into tight fists, trying to keep my cool at my desk. Highly ranked wolves and some of the elders, who had told me before I left that I would find somebody there that I would have to mate, filled my office.

My fingers tapped the desk, my rage burning inside me. I fucking loathed talking to them. They were all set in the old ways, and that's not how the world worked anymore. But it didn't matter. We had a problem. A big fucking problem.

My gaze found Livia, sitting opposite me on the couch in my office. Marcus stood at my desk, along with a couple of other wolves, debating back and forth and back and forth about what we should do. Livia looked at me, and I glanced back at her, my nostrils flaring.

If she had just gone to the fucking wedding with me, none of this would've happened. Why did she have to consistently try to get herself into trouble? Put herself into fucking danger? Everything I did, I did to protect her.

I didn't want her to get hurt. I wanted to protect her.

If anyone knew that she was my mate—and that she couldn't shift, that she couldn't

protect herself—they'd hurt her. They'd hunt her down to hurt me, and in turn, obliterate this entire pack.

And somehow, she had gotten herself into even deeper shit than that.

She finally broke my gaze and looked at Chase, one of my warriors. The night before we left for the wedding, I had heard whispers that he and she had gotten together, and I hadn't been able to stop myself from calling her into my office to clear the air .

I gritted my teeth and forced myself to look away. Had something been going on between them? We had barely been home for an hour, and he was already looking her way too. Why was it that everywhere we went, somebody was obsessed with her?

First Chase, then that fucker Elijah.

"We must find a solution," Marcus said beside me. "Alpha, what do you think?"

"The solution is to punish Livia for this," an elder said.

My gaze drifted from Livia to him, the back of my throat burning.

I had to do something. If I let Livia get away with this... something was going to happen. I didn't know what... but I couldn't deal with it right now. We had enemies attacking our borders, an entire pack after us now.

A war had fucking started because of her.

Livia stood up and crossed her arms. "I didn't do anything wrong! All I did was enroll in the games. He wouldn't surrender to me, so I killed him. I don't know why everyone has made such a big deal out of this!"

“You shouldn’t have been in the games,” Chase said.

I growled to silence him. He wasn’t going to speak to her like that; only I could.

“Why not?” she exclaimed. “Anyone could join them.”

“As soon as you saw that it was him, you should’ve left,” another elder chimed in, shaking his head in disappointment. “There’s no reason for you, someone who can’t even shift, to fight against Elijah, the only successor for the Whispering Pines Pack.”

Livia growled and stepped forward, meeting him eye to eye.

“Well, I did. And I killed him. So what do you have to say about that? I’m sick and tired of everyone here thinking that I’m weak because I can’t shift.

” She looked at me and flared her nostrils, her eyes glossy, and I knew she was trying to keep it all in.

“Why do you all constantly think that I’m weak?

Even after I’ve proved myself, it’s not enough. It’s never fucking enough.”

“Livia,” I growled because I didn’t want her breaking down here in front of everyone.

If she cried, they’d think their point had been proven.

She bared her teeth at me, then stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind her. I listened to her stomping all the way down the hallway until her footsteps disappeared somewhere in the packhouse.

“I will handle her,” I said to the wolves, heading to the door to lead the charge. “But

we must first deal with the enemy at our borders.”

Source Creation Date: August 1, 2025, 7:16 am

LIVIA

My eyes fluttered open, adjusting to the dusk light. The war cries and howls from the battle with the Whispering Pines Pack had stopped a half hour ago, and I had been going in and out of a nap for the past three.

A breeze blew through my window, and I pulled the blankets over my almost bare body to stop the goosebumps. I whimpered softly, hoping the wind would stop, but it only seemed to get stronger. So I pushed myself up in the bed and leaned against the headboard.

Caelan and Dad had forbidden me from helping them, so I had to lie here and feel nothing but guilt for causing all this pain, all this death. It wasn't my fault that Elijah hadn't surrendered, but... I could do nothing about it now.

The room was quiet, and I couldn't hear much except some murmuring from outside.

After blowing out a low breath, I let my gaze drift around the room. The heat last night had nearly killed me, and all I wanted to do was sleep forever. I didn't want to go into it again, especially not here.

Especially not around that asshole I had to call Alpha .

It was obvious that he didn't love me or care about me, outside of me being a pack member. So why should I care about him? I hated it here, and I wanted to leave. No, I would leave. My fingers grazed against Mom's pendant. I had to learn more about my powers.

I furrowed my brows and stared at my windowsill for a couple moments, noticing a letter with a black ribbon tied around it that hadn't been there before. What the hell was that? There was a chair in front of my door, so I would've heard if anyone had tried to get in.

But it hadn't been moved.

My stomach twisted at the thought of someone being in my room while I slept. I peered at the letter for a moment. It definitely wasn't from Caelan, nor from Dad. Maybe it was from Chase? Though... he wouldn't leave me a heartfelt note.

All he wanted was to fuck.

After sliding out of bed, I made it to the windowsill and peered out to see if I could find the messenger. But there was nothing, nobody. So I grabbed the letter and swallowed hard, my heart racing.

While the ribbon was tied on one side, a wax seal held it in place on the other.

One dark red crimson seal that smelled like blood.

But that wasn't what made my stomach drop. No, it was the fact that the seal had the same symbol as Mom's pendant, the same one those witches had given me. Was this from Esma and Circe?

After swallowing hard, I broke the seal and unrolled the parchment.

Princess,

You must return before the Whispering Pines Pack finds you.

They know who you truly are. They know the powers you hold. They've been trying to kill you and those like you—like your mother—for decades.

You're the only one who can save us.

So, please, return when you can. Alone.

- E & C

My pulse quickened, and heat crawled up along my spine. The note smelled faintly familiar, a scent that I hadn't smelled in years. And something deep inside me stirred. Maybe it was my wolf, or maybe it was something else entirely.

I paced around the room, rereading each line until the words were imprinted in my head.

None of this made any sense. What did it even mean?

And... Princess ?

Princess.

Surely, they had gotten the wrong person. How had they made it here? Who had delivered this? Was this some sick joke that my packmates were playing on me? But having it signed by E and C? Esma and Circe?

I folded the letter and re-tied the black ribbon around it, placing it in my bedside drawer.

“What are you looking at?” Caelan asked.

I slammed the drawer closed and twirled around to see Caelan standing at my door. He leaned against the frame with his huge arms crossed over his chest, making his biceps bulge in all the right ways. Don't ask me how he got in without me hearing, stupid alpha.

Didn't he learn his lesson yesterday when I was in heat?!

After opening and closing my mouth a handful of times, I shook my head. "Nothing."

He stepped into my room and shut the door. "Nothing? It doesn't look like nothing."

I shrugged. "Well, it was nothing. Why do you care anyway?"

"You know why I care."

"You didn't care when I was in heat."

He stepped closer to me and growled. "You know that I did."

I hummed in annoyance and turned back around to shut my window. "Sure."

Before I could say another word, he had me pressed up against the window, drawing his nose up the column of my neck. "You know what you mean to me, but we can't be together. I'm trying to protect you."

"Protect me from what? You? Maybe you're just trying to protect yourself."

Another growl left his mouth, and he drew his canines right up against my neck, right where he would mark me if he truly cared, if he truly wanted me, if I wasn't just a girl to hook up with like I was to Chase.

“If I didn’t care about you, if I didn’t want to protect you, I would’ve left you in that arena. You know that. You know what you mean to me. And you know I’d do anything to protect you. So me not marking you while you were in heat, there’s a reason for that.”

“And what’s the reason?” I asked. “Afraid that you’ll let your wolf make your decisions like he is right now?”

I didn’t need to see him to know that his wolf was out.

To feel his wolf out. His hands were all over my body, his tongue on my neck.

His canines on my skin. I didn’t know why he had finally succumbed to his wolf and why he couldn’t let him out when I was in heat so he could satisfy me. But it didn’t matter.

If he wanted to use me, then I could use him too.

I’d savor one last night with him and then... I’d be gone. Because I needed answers. And I would do anything to get them. Even if it meant leaving. And if I had to leave, then I’d take all the time that I could to be with my mate for the last time ever.

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LIVIA

While the heat soared inside my body, goosebumps were somehow still rising on my skin. There was something so polarizing in the most delicious way possible about being with someone I could never have.

My nipples hardened underneath my shirt, and I gulped.

Fuck.

Fucking Caelan was all I wanted to do.

Caelan's gaze dropped down to my chest, and he stepped toward me, a small smirk traveling across his lips. The air between us seemed electric, the tension building quickly. Those dangerous eyes were teasing, taunting me.

More warmth spread through my body at an overwhelming rate. I stepped back, attempting to have some sanity in this situation, though I had none. I needed to stop this right now, because something deep inside me was about to snap.

Maybe it was finally my wolf. Maybe she had come out to play.

Or maybe... it was that wicked heat.

Every time I had gone into heat, I had locked myself away in my room, and he had buried himself in office work. But today, I shouldn't have been in heat. No, it wasn't a full moon, and I... I had just gone through heat less than two weeks ago.

Before I could stop him, he trapped me between him and the wall, capturing my wrists and pinning them above my head, his firm grip cooling my skin anywhere and everywhere that he touched. I bit back a whimper.

I hated and loved this: my wolf, his wolf, the mate bond that he would never recognize.

“Tell me,” he murmured against my skin, his body now flush against mine. His other hand drew circles around my right hip, cooling me off just slightly, yet my core was burning with pleasure. “Tell me how much you want me.”

I opened and closed my mouth, wanting to say something bratty to him, but my wolf wouldn't let me. I didn't want to fuel his ego any more than I already had, but Lycos , I wanted him. I wanted him so badly.

“Tell me,” he repeated, his lips traveling up and down the column of my neck, both cooling and searing my skin. The soft spot on my neck ached, and I just wanted him to... to... mark me. “Tell me. Tell me. Tell me.”

When the words left his mouth, a moan left mine. My eyes fluttered closed as his lips hovered over my soft spot—the spot that someone would mark one day. Just... not him. Yet something deep inside me—the heat, my wolf—was burning hotter and hotter.

I wanted this, and I couldn't deny it anymore.

“Please,” I whispered.

I had been fighting him all day, hell even the past few days, and I was so tired of it all. He was tired of it too; I could see it in his eyes. He wanted me just as badly as I wanted him, but neither of us wanted to admit it to each other.

Because if we admitted it to each other, then we'd also have to acknowledge that we weren't going to mate. The reasons why. And honestly? I didn't want to believe that he just wanted to protect me.

What I thought... what I honestly thought was that he was embarrassed of me.

What alpha would want a mate who couldn't shift?

Thinking that was easier, somehow.

"Please, I need you," I whispered.

After swiftly picking me up, he dumped me onto the bed and crawled between my legs. He was already ripping off our clothes, his golden eyes glowing, which meant that his wolf was out to play, like he usually was in times like this.

I dug my nails into his muscular shoulders, and he positioned himself at my entrance. I inhaled sharply, spreading my legs even wider. He growled against my neck, the sound warming my skin. I tightened and tightened and tightened at the mere sound of how possessive it was.

At the thought of it one day truly being mine.

But it never would be.

A low grunt left his mouth, and he slid inside me.

My head lolled back against the pillows, and a soft moan left my mouth as I clenched around him. "More," I said in a breathy moan. "Please..."

He thrust in and out of me, filling me then leaving me empty, over and over and over

until I lost count. My pussy was clenching hard on to his cock, my mind buzzing. And I was desperate for him. Desperate for all of him.

I wrapped my legs around his waist, pulling him closer every time he thrust into me. My wolf—something that I had never really felt before—was clawing at my insides, desperate to come out too, but something was holding her back.

“My mate,” he grunted and growled in my ear, getting deeper and deeper inside me. His mouth was all over my throat. The moonlight was flooding in through my windows, bouncing off his skin. “I’m going to fill you up with so much of my cum... that you’ll be pregnant with my pup by morning.”

“Holy—” Before I could finish my sentence, pleasure exploded through my body. Wave after wave after wave rushed through me at the thought of him wanting me so much that he’d try to get me pregnant with his pup.

He let out a low groan and stilled, deep inside my pussy, pumping me full with his cum. I closed my eyes, wishing, hoping that one day things would change. Hoping that one day, I’d actually be able to call him my mate. That one day, we might actually have pups together.

Source Creation Date: August 1, 2025, 7:16 am

LIVIA

A light hum drifted through my window, the breeze chilling my skin. I blinked my eyes a few times until they adjusted to the bright moonlight flooding in through the curtains. Caelan's arm was slung around my waist, his lips on my ear.

The howls of dying wolves rang through my memory from the arena, then from the rogues. I could just imagine that was how my packmates sounded too before we returned home, being attacked relentlessly by the Whispering Pines Pack.

My chest tightened, a wave of guilt surrounding me from all sides.

Our pack continued to be attacked every single day, by rogues and by the Whispering Pine, because... of me. Because I'd entered into that tournament. Because I'd used magic when I should've been able to shift and use my wolf. Because I had killed that man in the battle.

Even though it had all been completely legal, I wanted this to be over.

I didn't want my pack to blame me for their mates dying. While I couldn't shift, I knew deep down that this was all my fault. I had the strength to stop this, and I should stop it. I needed to stop it before it got worse.

So I slid out of bed as quietly as I could, careful not to wake Caelan.

He would hate me for sneaking out, but I needed to leave. By myself.

After tugging on some clothes, I walked to the door with my heart racing. I'd have maybe an hour tops to make it as far into the forest as I could if I left right now. I could easily sneak past the guards; I knew their routine.

Floorboards creaked underneath my feet, but I moved quickly. When I finally made it to the door, I took one last look back at Caelan's sleeping figure on my bed, the way his muscles were relaxed, his soft lips, his unstrained brows.

Something deep inside me told me to stay, that this was dangerous, that he'd be pissed at me for leaving without warning him.

But when had I ever listened to that voice before?

No matter how close he got to surrendering to his wolf, Caelan would never mate me.

My chest tightened, and I dropped my gaze. I always said that I hated him, but I had fallen in love with him the first time I laid my eyes on him, that first night that Dad introduced me to him after Mom died.

For a split moment back then, I had thought that life wouldn't be so bad...

I released a tense breath and opened the door.

All of that didn't matter anymore. I needed to do this for myself. I needed to figure out who I was, where this power was coming from. I needed to go back to those... witches. If I could learn how to use my magic, then I might not be so useless around here.

I could actually help protect and defend the only family I had left.

LIVIA

I peered into the witches' cabin through the door that was slightly ajar, the stench of blood drifting through my nose. With goosebumps raised on my arms, I knocked in hopes that someone would answer.

It had taken me nearly twelve hours to find my way back to their cabin, and I had somehow made it in one piece without anyone attacking me, which I had found suspicious, but nobody had been following me. I'd made sure to check and recheck multiple times.

"Hello?" I called through the dark cabin.

No answer.

When I stepped into the house, the stench filled my lungs. Where were they? Maybe they were out. They had to be out, right? My stomach twisted. No, I knew that wasn't true. Somewhere deep down, I knew that something had happened to them.

Someone had killed them.

The living room was empty. Their bedrooms empty. The spare room empty.

But the kettle was still hot in the kitchen, and an array of herbs decorated the counters. A small kitchen knife was in the sink, covered in blood. My eyes widened, and I spotted a droplet on the ground, then another, then another.

I followed the blood to a door where the stench was the strongest. Bile rose in my throat as I opened the door and stared into a dark corridor. At the end, there was a flicker of light. I sucked in a sharp breath and entered.

While I wanted to turn back, to run home, I had come here for a reason. And that reason lay with two witches who knew about my powers, who knew my mother, who had all the answers I needed.

My brain was screaming at me to leave, but something deep inside me kept pulling me toward the light at the end of the hallway until I was in the room and standing over Esma and Circe lying dead in a pool of their own blood.

I screamed at the top of my lungs, dropping to my knees.

As soon as my flesh touched the blood, it all began glowing. The same symbol that had been on my necklace's pendant was drawn around the room in their blood, all over the walls, fucking everywhere.

"What happened..." I asked, looking around and shaking my head.

While I wanted to blame the Whispering Pines Pack for this, the wounds on their bodies looked... self-inflicted. My hands trembled. How... Why? They'd told me that they'd be here to explain everything whenever I wanted, and that was... barely a couple days ago.

Why did they kill themselves? Why were they... Why were they dead?

My fingers twitched, the pool of blood drawing me to it like a magnet. I didn't know why, but I submerged my hand in the crimson liquid. While the puddle was only an inch deep, my fingers dipped further into it, almost as if... it were going through the concrete floor underneath.

Forearm deep now, my arm came out the other side, almost swimming in the air underneath. Yes, air. Not dirt. Not more concrete. Air. I fished around and finally grabbed what felt like a book.

It took everything I had to pull it back up through the concrete, then through the blood.

But once it was finally out, I dropped it onto my lap. That symbol covered it again and again. I sucked in a sharp breath, unable to stop myself from opening the pages that looked like they hadn't touched the blood at all.

The writing... was in a language that I couldn't understand, yet somehow my body did. I didn't know why there was so much blood. I didn't know what this all meant. But the words... the words were seemingly coming to life.

Blood. Magic. Princess.

Princess...

I had seen that word before. It was in that letter that had been on my windowsill. But what did the symbol mean? Why had the witches killed themselves? What was this book? A book of magic, maybe. My mind was reeling with a thousand different thoughts.

I didn't know what it was, but maybe there were more.

So I shoved my hand down into the puddle again, letting it slide through the concrete floor with ease this time and into the hidden chamber underneath us.

I fished out another book, and then another, and then even another.

I wanted to submerge my entire body to see what I was missing, but I feared that I wouldn't be able to return.

Just as I was reaching out one final time, someone grabbed my hand.

Another shriek left my mouth, and I withdrew my hand as quickly as I could.

What... was that? Who was that? Were there people down there?

All the blood was making my eyes and my brain so hazy. I had to have imagined that.

A door behind me creaked open, and I snapped my head toward it, and my eyes widened. It wasn't Caelan. It wasn't Dad. It wasn't even the witches who— who the hell knew —could've probably come back to life.

It was Soren, Alpha of the Whispering Pines Pack.

My stomach dropped, and I stumbled around, positioning myself between the ancient books and him, my fists balled behind my back. While Elijah had been a spitting image of him, Soren was twice Elijah's size, taller and even more muscular.

"What... What do you want?" I asked. "Who are you?"

"You know who I am, Livia." He stepped toward me, blocking my escape. "You killed my son."

My heart was thumping loudly inside my chest. My throat was dry. My head was spinning. But what was worse than all of that was... I could feel my heat returning. It was very, very weak, but I could feel it.

Is this place causing me to go through something? Why is it returning now?!

Lycos, I shouldn't have left. Or maybe Caelan should've marked me when he had the chance, then I wouldn't have to go through this every month, and he'd know where I was at all times through our bond.

But Caelan hadn't marked me because he didn't want to mark me.

The heat rose faster than it ever had, making my blood boil inside me. The blood on the walls glowed so brightly that I would've thought we were outside if I didn't know any better. My hands began trembling.

When he stepped toward me again, I knew that I had to think quickly. I knew that I had to find a solution. Because if I didn't? Soren would take everything he wanted from me, then kill me for slaughtering his son and embarrassing his entire bloodline.

Source Creation Date: August 1, 2025, 7:16 am

LIVIA

I stared with wide eyes at the alpha of the Whispering Pines Pack, then my gaze flickered around the room as quickly as it could. Last time, when I had fought his son, I'd had a dagger. I could use it. I hadn't been trained in weapons, but it somehow seemingly came naturally to me.

But there were no weapons here. There was only blood and two dead witches.

"There's nowhere to go." A low chuckle left his mouth, and he inhaled the scent of my lingering heat and stepped toward me, his canines dripping with saliva. "And Lycos, you smell so good."

My heart pounded so loudly that I could hear it in my ears. I swallowed hard and stepped back, stumbling into the table and kicking the books behind me. I didn't know what to do. I didn't know how to use this magic. I couldn't shift. What had I been thinking?

Part of me knew that there was a chance that he would find me. And I had just left? What did my pack think? That I had been taken? Did they even fucking care? No matter what anyone said, it didn't seem like my pack wanted me there.

"There's nothing like an unmated, unmarked she-wolf in heat."

"Stay away," I warned, hands out in front of me.

"Or what?" He took another step toward me, his eyes so dark they were almost black.

The hairs on my arms stood up. I had never, ever seen eyes so black in a wolf before. My heart was thrashing inside my chest, and I swallowed hard again. What could I do? I was trapped here alone with him, and surely his pack would be here soon too...

... if they weren't already outside.

"Stay away from me," I said again, this time my voice trembling.

When my back hit the table, he seized my hip and pulled me closer to him. A wave of heat rushed through me, and somehow, somehow, his touch kind of felt... good. The heat was surging inside me, coursing through my body.

Everywhere except where his touch was burned so hot.

"Please, please stop."

"What a cute little mate you'll make," he said with a smirk.

But his neck was already marked. He was already mated. Hell, he had a son. But he didn't care. No one in the Whispering Pines Pack cared at all. About anything. He would fuck me. He would claim me. He would mark me. And I'd be his.

Tears welled up in my eyes, because I... I belonged to someone. I was supposed to belong to someone. I had a mate, someone who didn't want me. But deep down? I wanted him. Truly, I did.

So I shoved the alpha off of me, and he stumbled back.

"Fucking bitch," he snarled and lunged at me again, this time grabbing my wrist and hurling me down to the ground. "I'm gonna have you one way or another before I kill you. Might as well make it easy for me."

But I wasn't going to make it easy for him.

No, I needed to get away now. I needed to do something.

I kicked and I shoved and I punched and I did whatever I could to try to get him off of me.

But he was climbing between my legs, faster and harder than I could stop him.

I had learned how to fight several times, but I couldn't fight a wolf, never mind an alpha wolf.

Not one out for vengeance. Not one who was responding to a she-wolf in heat.

It was primal, something that he couldn't control even if he wanted to. But he didn't want to.

"I said get away from me!" I shouted once more, shoving him back as hard as I could. It gave me enough room to scramble backward toward the pool of blood. My hand fell into it and down through the concrete.

Could my entire body wiggle down there? Could I escape through this hole?

I didn't really have time to react before something was thrust into my hands. I grabbed it as hard as I could, yanked it out of the puddle of blood, and slammed a silver knife deep into the alpha's throat.

He screamed as the silver burned through his flesh, just like it had with his son. All the blood in the room suddenly evaporated, being pulled into the silver knife quicker and quicker and quicker and then pushed through his body.

The knife drew more blood from all directions of the room, sinking through the walls, running through the concrete, drifting through the air to fill it. I didn't know how it got there. I didn't know where it came from. But I didn't care.

I was going to kill this fucker right here, right now.

I pulled the knife out and stabbed him again—this time right in the cervical spine.

His entire body thrashed, and then his spine shattered. Not just one bone. All of them. Just like his son. It shook the knife uncontrollably, but I held on to it with two hands and secured it deep inside him.

My breaths came out ragged, and I stood over his corpse.

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LIVIA

With trembling hands, I stared down at the dead wolf. Like I had with Elijah, I had shattered Soren's spine in several places by stabbing him with a dagger and by... using that magic. Blood magic .

My gaze traveled around the room, the walls completely bare now.

All the blood had evaporated. There weren't any glowing markings on the walls, nor a pool of blood at my feet. So much blood had been pulled through the walls that there had to be more somewhere.

Though... I didn't know where it had come from.

Maybe those people in the underground chamber?

Tears welled up in my eyes. I hadn't meant to kill anyone, but I'd had to kill Soren or else he would kill me. I had to look out for myself because I had gotten myself into this. And I had finally defeated our enemy for us.

So nobody in our pack should die again.

While I knew I would never be a luna, maybe this was as close as I could get to one by protecting my pack.

Heart thumping so loudly that I could hear it in my ears, I headed to the door. Howls drifted into my ears from a distance, and I knew that the Whispering Pines Pack

would be coming to kill me soon.

I knew I'd be surrounded.

I didn't know how to use my magic. I didn't know how I even had magic. And I still couldn't shift into my wolf. But I had to defend myself. I had to kill them all too. Then I would return to Caelan after this.

After grabbing the torch that lit the room, I headed back down the dark corridor to the witches' cabin. Were those books about blood magic? Could I... be part blood mage? Was Mom a witch too? I'd had to return and retrieve the books after I dealt with the pack to get answers.

Fear bubbled in my stomach as I found myself at the door. I didn't know how many wolves were out there waiting for me, but I opened the door anyway and stepped out into the daylight, eyes widening in sheer horror.

Hundreds of corpses from the Whispering Pines Pack decorated the living room, the kitchen, and even the forest around the cabin. The bodies were thin, stick thin, like they were skin and bones and nothing more.

I walked through the bodies, listening to howls in the distance. How were they all... dead? None of them had any open wounds. Yet it looked like all the blood had been drained from their bodies. Did I do that to them?

Maybe I had. Maybe that's where all that blood had come from through the walls. They were all connected to Soren through blood. Was I powerful enough to kill hundreds of wolves just because... I touched their alpha's blood?

My stomach twisted. I needed to learn how to control this. And quickly.

“Livia,” Caelan called through the forest, his voice almost broken. I had never heard him sound so desperate, so lonely. “Livia, please! Tell me you’re here. Tell me you’re alive!”

And then I saw him emerge from the trees. He stood across the field of bodies, his eyes wide and glowing gold. Before I could say a word, he was at my side, his arms around my waist, pulling me toward him.

“Don’t you ever fucking leave me again,” he said, burying his face into my neck. “Are you safe? Did they hurt you?”

“I...”

“Who killed the Whispering Pines Pack?”

I swallowed hard. “Don’t be mad at me... but I think I did.”

“You did this?” he asked me, pulling away slightly. “How?”

I opened and closed my mouth a handful of times, shaking my head. I didn’t know how. I wasn’t sure how to explain this. My body had sort of just reacted. And right now, the warmth was gathering inside me again.

The heat was building, and I just wanted to crawl out of my skin. Sweat began to form at the base of my neck, and suddenly a sheet covered my back. I shoved him away and dragged the back of my hand across my forehead.

I was hot... really, really hot.

And he never wanted to see me when I was in heat. He loathed it.

“Alpha...” I whispered, my breath harsh. “You should go.”

A low growl rumbled from his lips. “Livia, you’re going into heat.”

“I can’t stop it...” I whimpered. “Please, leave.”

“I’m not leaving you. Not again,” he said, stepping toward me.

The heat burned even hotter the closer he came. And my core... it was throbbing. I closed my eyes, desperate for him to touch me. It seemed like it was the only thing that I craved. I needed him to touch me. I needed his hands all over me. I needed him to mark me.

My entire body shivered, even though it felt like it was on fire.

The thought of his teeth deep in my neck?—

I let out a low breath, stared up at him. “Please, if you’re not going to mark me, then leave... then reject me. Because I... I need you to mark me. I need you to touch me everywhere. And I can’t handle it anymore.”

His eyes shifted from gold to brown, and suddenly his wolf wasn’t in control of his emotions anymore, which meant that there was a chance he would reject me. And if he rejected me, then maybe this heat would finally die.

Or... it’d kill me.

Instead of walking away, he continued closer until he was grabbing my waist and pulling me toward him again, our bodies flush against each other. I sucked in a sharp breath, his touch so cold yet warm at the same time.

My heart raced inside my chest. This wasn't his wolf making a rash decision.

No, it was him.

"Please, I know that you don't love me," I said in one last desperate plea. "I know that we can never be mated. So please, please..."

Before I could finish my sentence, Alpha Caelan—my father's best friend, the man twice my age, and my fated mate—sunk his canines into my neck and marked me. Finally claiming me as his own.

Source Creation Date: August 1, 2025, 7:16 am

LIVIA

Pleasure exploded throughout my body as Caelan sank his teeth deeper and deeper inside my neck. I dragged my nails down his back, my head rolling back to give him better access to me.

“Alpha,” I breathed, the pressure almost too much to handle.

The heat that had been coursing through my body suddenly evaporated, and I grabbed on to him tighter. Part of me expected him to pull away, to realize what he was doing and regret it immediately, to reject me like I’d had nightmares he would since I met him.

But he continued to sink his teeth into my neck until his gums reached my flesh.

And then he stayed there. Completely still.

Until the mate bond fully snapped into place between us.

His thoughts raced through my head, his energy through my body. Every one of his strengths, his weaknesses, the feelings that he had at this very moment were somehow seared into my body as if I had known this man forever.

“Please,” I whispered, unsure about what I was actually pleading for, but I needed more.

Lycos, I so desperately want more.

I wanted him. All of him. I wanted to finally complete this bond between us.

Still, he stayed inside me, his teeth nestled against my skin, his eyes closed softly, and his body stiff. I moved closer, the pressure building inside my core. And even though the heat was long gone, a different type of heat was now raging inside my core.

“Lycos,” I moaned. “Please, I need it now.”

Suddenly, he snapped his eyes open and pulled his teeth out of my neck. One moment, he was inside me, and the next, he was ripping off my clothes, turning me over so my chest was against the wall, and pulling out his thick, hard cock.

It throbbed against me when he slapped it on my aching pussy, then he shoved it between my swollen lips and into me. Wave after wave after wave of pleasure rushed through my body, and I clamped around him tightly, my nails digging into the wall until my fingertips whitened.

“Oh my Lycos,” I cried. “Oh my Lycos, oh my Lycos, oh my Lycos!”

“Moan for me, little mate,” he murmured into my ear between soft grunts and groans. He slammed into me, getting deeper with every pump. “When you come for me, our bond will finally be sealed, and you’ll be mine for good.”

The pressure continued to build higher inside me. He gripped my waist tightly, pulling me toward him with every single thrust. I pushed back against the wall to give him some help, needing him deeper. It wasn’t just a want. No, something deep inside me needed it.

I craved it.

“Please, please, come with me. Please!”

“Lycos, you’re so tight,” he growled against my mark. “Keep bucking those hips against me. Back and forth just like that. You move so fucking well, little mate. So well... You want my cum bad, huh?”

Moans left my mouth, the heat building up inside me. My cheeks were flushed, and my nipples were aching. The pressure built higher and higher and higher. He kept talking, and my body kept responding.

My pussy getting tighter, clamping down, until finally...

I rolled my head back, and the pressure exploded inside me.

A few low, rough grunts later, and he stilled deep inside my pussy.

Pleasure rushed through me from all angles. My entire body tingled. My breathing was ragged. And before I realized what I was doing, I found myself pushing away from him, turning around, and finally claiming what was mine.

Though my teeth were blunt, I sank them as far as I could into my mate’s neck.

Source Creation Date: August 1, 2025, 7:16 am

CAELAN

With my hand wrapped tightly around Livia's, I led us through the forest and back toward our pack. My gaze flickered to her every so often. I still couldn't believe why or how she had survived that attack by herself.

Not only survived but defeated them all by draining their blood.

I had never seen anything like it on this land, and I wanted to find out more. She was right; I should've let her stay with those witches before they were killed so she would learn a bit more about her powers.

But I was fucking terrified of losing her, because if I did leave her there and she died alongside the witches... then my mark wouldn't be on her neck right now. I reached up and grazed the mark on my neck.

And she wouldn't have bitten me either.

My lips curled into a small smile, and we continued through the quiet woods, spotting some chipmunks running across our path every so often. I didn't think she realized it yet, but her teeth had extended into small canines when she marked me.

She did have a wolf, and she was finally about to come out and play with me.

"Are you sure you want to be mates with me?" she asked quietly, breaking the silence.

I furrowed my brows, anger rising inside me. “What do you mean? Of course I want to be mates with you. Don’t say that again.”

“But...” she started, keeping her head down and her gaze on the dirt path. She tried to pull her hand out of mine, but I kept a tight grip on it. “But you said that you didn’t. There were so many times you didn’t want me.”

“I’ve always wanted you,” I said, running the pad of my thumb across her knuckles. “But... It’s been hard. I have a lot of pressure on me. I didn’t want that to be transferred to you. I didn’t want anyone—from inside or outside our pack—to hurt you because you can’t shift.”

“But—”

“It was my stupid way of trying to protect you, and I... wish I would’ve just believed in you from the start,” I said, the guilt slamming into me in waves.

“When I first met you, and you tried to shift during pack training and couldn’t...

my wolf... he wouldn’t let me put you in any sort of danger.

I thought the best course of action was to keep you at a distance. ”

She stayed quiet for a long time, and I wished I could’ve erased the months I’d spent pushing her away. Using her. It wasn’t right. That’s not who I was, or at least, not who I wanted to be anymore.

I was never ashamed of her, but I knew how much someone could hurt her.

“It’s okay,” she said softly. “It’s okay if you don’t want me.”

“Stop saying that,” I growled. “I want you. I love you.”

“But...”

“There are no buts.”

“There are, though,” she whispered, pausing on the path. “There’s so much we don’t know. About me, about these powers. And...” She lowered her voice, wrapping her arms around herself. “And I’m scared.”

“We’ll figure it out together,” I said, drawing her closer, one hand in her hair, her head on my chest. “I swear we will. I don’t care how long it takes. I’ll find someone to help you. Or I’ll help you myself.”

“But... what if you can’t?”

“I will.” I grabbed her hand and continued walking, the forest becoming familiar. “Come on. We’re almost home.”

Nerves bubbled up inside my stomach, something I had only started experiencing since she’d made it to this pack several months ago. She always made me nervous, in a good way, because I had to be the best I could for her.

But now... I wondered if my best wasn’t good enough.

She was stronger than me, but she didn’t know how to control it or use it, which meant that we were bound to have more enemies looking to take her, to dissect her, to use her for their benefit, especially once someone stumbled upon the Whispering Pines Pack drained.

Once we reached the end of our journey and I spotted our property in this distance,

Livia pulled her hair over her mark to cover it. A pang of hurt struck me in the chest, and I tucked her hair behind her shoulder again to show it off.

“I don’t know if I want Dad to see,” she whispered. “I don’t know what he’ll say.”

“It doesn’t matter what he says. You’re mine. And I’m not going to hide you. Not anymore.”

“But... I’m weak,” she said.

“You’re not weak, and you know it.”

“But what will everyone think?”

“I don’t care what they think. You’re mine.”

I didn’t care how many times I had to say it. I’d say it again and again and again. She was mine. And she was going to act like it. I wasn’t hiding her any longer, and she wasn’t going to hide me.

She was my mate. And I was proud of her.

Source Creation Date: August 1, 2025, 7:16 am

LIVIA

“Dad... I... I can explain,” I said, my heart racing inside my chest.

When we finally returned home from the cabin a second time, Dad stared between Caelan and me with wide eyes, totally ignoring the blood covering our bodies and fixating on the marks on each of our necks.

There was no more hiding. No more pretending.

I opened and closed my mouth a handful of times, trying to explain. Trying to figure out what to say in order for him to accept it. But I didn’t know... What could I say to him? We had both been hiding this for so long.

Murmurs erupted between our pack members, and I suddenly wanted to crawl up into my bed like the first time I had come here, pretending like Mom was still alive. I hated the drama, and me being the first luna who couldn’t shift?! Of course that’d cause problems.

What was I thinking?! Why’d I think this would be easy? That this would work at all?!

After another tense moment, Dad finally pulled me toward him, enveloping me in a tight hug. My eyes widened, my entire body stiffening for a moment before I finally found myself hugging him back and relaxing.

Dad never hugged, but I... I needed this right now.

“You’re... not mad?” I whispered.

“No. I thank Lycos that you’re safe,” he said into my ear, tugging me closer.

“But...”

“I don’t care about who you’re mated to. I just want you to be safe. I know I don’t show it that often. I know it sometimes feels like I want you to leave—that I don’t love you—but I do. I just want you to be happy.”

“Dad...”

“Ever since your mother died...” His voice cracked, and he pulled back just enough for me to see the tears in his eyes. “I know we weren’t together, but you remind me so much of her. I always wanted her to be happy. That’s why I had to let her go.”

My eyes burned, and I shook my head to try to shove my tears back. Mom had talked about Dad all the time with happiness in her eyes, and he hadn’t mentioned her once since she passed, so I had always thought that he hated her.

To hear this...

Chest tightening, I drew the pad of my thumb across my cheek and wiped away the tears. “Are you sure you’re not mad?” I whispered, brows drawn together and heart pounding inside my chest. I needed someone to tell me that this was okay.

“No, I’m not mad.” He pulled away and nodded, a smile slowly dancing across his lips. He reached into his jean pocket and pulled out a folded letter. “I actually have something for you. It was your mother’s.”

“Mom’s?” I asked, the warmth building inside me.

He handed it to me. “I wish I could open it, but I can’t.”

The tethered letter was locked with a crimson red seal that had the same geometric pattern as my pendant and that letter. I didn’t know why, but I found myself grabbing Caelan’s hand, my fingers wrapping around his pointer.

“Please, cut my palm,” I said.

“I’m not gonna cut your palm, Livia. Are you crazy?”

“Please,” I pleaded. “I promise. I need you to.”

Caelan looked at Dad. Once Dad nodded, Caelan extended his nail into a sharp claw, sighed as if he couldn’t believe he was doing this, and cut through the thin skin on my palm. Blood pooled inside it.

I balled my hand into a fist and hovered it over the seal. Drops of blood fell from my fist onto the seal, and it started to glow a crimson red. Suddenly, the seal came undone, and the letter finally had room to breathe, unraveling itself in my grasp.

Mom’s handwriting graced the paper.

My dearest Livia,

I know that this may be hard to believe, because our kind has been long forgotten, but there’s something important that I must tell you.

Nobody can ever know—not even you—until it’s time.

But you are the princess of the Blood Throne.

My sweetheart, I can just imagine your surprise right now. But yes, you are a

princess.

We have been long forgotten because of Whispering Pines Pack. They killed the majority of our kind over the past few decades. And if you're reading this letter, it's because they have finally killed me too and you've found your way back to your father.

When you get this letter, when you understand, when you finally have access to your powers, you need to find the others. They're still out there, bound in blood underground to protect them. If you search through the forest, you'll find more of us.

Please, make it your mission to find your family. It is my only wish, my only hope.

I couldn't tell you because I would've put you in too much danger. But you're strong. Stronger than me. Stronger than anyone you will ever know.

And I will always love you.

Love you forever, even when I'm gone,

Mom

Tears fell from my cheeks onto the paper, staining the ink, and I handed the letter to Dad with trembling hands. I stared at the ground for a long time before I had the strength to meet his gaze. "Did you know anything about this?"

"No," he said after reading it over. "I swear, I didn't. Your mother... she didn't tell me much. I always thought that she was a wolf like me, but she could never shift either. She never showed me any such power."

I swallowed hard and looked at my mate, my chest tightening so desperately, wanting to meet the others like me, understand this power, reclaim our throne now that the

Whispering Pines Pack was eliminated.

But I finally had a mark; I finally had a mate.

Could I do that to him after everything? Could I just leave him to fulfill Mom's wishes?

"You're a princess," he hummed after reading over the letter, a small smirk traveling across his face. "A princess, a luna, and my mate." He curled his arm around my waist and pulled me closer. "I like the sound of that."

"Do you?" I asked playfully. "Then you'll definitely like the sound of me sneaking out again to find all of my kind?"

"You're not sneaking out anywhere," he said, his lips on my mark. He sucked in a long breath, as if his wolf was memorizing every bit of my scent. "I'll go with you. We'll all go with you. You're not alone. You belong to this pack. And now we belong to you."