



War Games (Jacky Leon #11)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Get your affairs in order. War doesn't wait for anyone to be ready.

With the terrible recent events weighing on my mind, I know the only way I can go is forward. My family, our allies, and I know for certain that there is a sect of witches that want to control the moon cursed for their own nefarious purposes. We don't know how many of them there are, and we don't know their names. We know it's not every witch, but that doesn't make us less suspicious of every single one of them. The threat is so grave that we finally have strong allies in the werewolves, not just in my fiancé, Heath Everson and those he leads. A common enemy can do that for those at each other's necks for so long.

Although the war is quiet, it brings with it what every war brings. Change. New duties and responsibilities. New things to celebrate and things to mourn. Everyone is getting their affairs in order, moving pieces of their armies and making sure their own positions are stable.

With all the pieces moving, I find myself in a game not meant for me.

A game I am ill equipped to win.

Total Pages (Source): 35

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 9:36 am

PROLOGUE

SUBIRA

S ubira stood in the darkness. Inky and pitch-black. She didn't look around, didn't wonder why it was so. She felt no fear of the expansive dark and had no reason to. She waited, knowing the only reason there was darkness was because the door was closed, and she had only just knocked.

He would answer. He always answered.

Her faith in him was unshaken, but she had a rueful smile as she waited longer than normal.

Oh, you know you can't run from me. We both know who will lose this game first.

She sent those words to him, as if she was whispering through a crack, knowing his sharp hearing would always hear her, no matter the distance.

It was still a few minutes before the surrounding landscape began to change, and light began to push away the darkness.

He opened the door.

Like a watercolor painting that her daughter Mischa would paint, the scene formed around her, colors clashing together until they reached the perfect hue, capturing detail that was also smeared. In her daughter's paintings, that smear was from water.

For them, it was because their memories of this place were old.

So very old, just like they were.

She turned, not seeing him immediately. She found him quickly enough, sitting on the dirt floor, stomped flat with bits of straw and other debris that helped soften the floor of this space. She didn't speak when she saw him, though, taking in the image as she did every time he opened the door for her.

They were in a hut, one she hadn't seen in some time. It no longer existed. It hadn't in over five thousand years, yet the details were still clear enough. Her fingers twitched at the urge to touch a weaving her mother had made for the space. She wondered if she opened the clay jars, if the smells of the herbs would still be clear. The walls were mud and thatch, the earliest building tools of humanity when they left the caves. The roof was thatch or straw as well.

This place, rough and lacking charm to anyone with modern sensibilities, was a special place, a powerful place. Her place.

This was the place where she had learned her first magic from her mother, starting with the magic that kept this very hut standing as long as it had endured. This was the place where she had grown up under the oppressive rule of her father. This was the place where her mother had died, blood between her legs, covering the floor, while Subira held her dead baby brother, stillborn and lost before she could ever properly greet him. She buried them both just outside, together in eternal peace. This was the place where her father attacked her, forcing her to survive the Change or die. This was the place where she hid from the monstrous men her father led into war, making potions and charms to attempt to help them at his direction.

This was the place where she had tried to do great magic for the first time, stretching her ability to control and use magic to the breaking point to master it.

This was the place where she had all the power, all the control, even over the men who once terrified her. Something her father despised but couldn't challenge, not at the time.

Something this man knew from the moment her father decided she would be his wife.

She looked at her mate, the husband her father chose in an offhand decision to reward his greatest warrior, thinking his warrior was just like him. Just another monster who would help control her, and she was also to control him.

He had known the moment her father told him they would be married that she had all the power here. He respected it from the first day. He never crossed a single line. Never made her know fear.

"We haven't visited this place in some time," she commented softly, finally looking back at her mate.

Hasan was on the ground, and the only modern thing in the room, the only thing that broke the illusion of this place, were the chains wrapped around him. His loincloth did very little to protect him from the burns he let those chains leave on his skin. They were new and wrong. They weren't supposed to be in this place.

He didn't speak, but she knew it could take some time to reach that point.

Here, deep in his mind, he was punishing himself. He knew she saw what he was doing. The scene was the same for him. His silence was another piece of his punishment for himself. She had to wait it out. Here, in his mind, she was a visitor, even if she was given free will to do as she pleased.

She stepped out, deciding he could continue to stew in his self-loathing for a moment as she went to see just how far his memories reached in this place.

The fire she kept outside her hut was still there. Around her, the grass was green due to a recent rainy season, and the land was flourishing. It was her favorite time of year as the wildlife returned to feast on the bounty. The nearby river was running strong, the sound loud enough that it was permanently embedded into the scene. The birds were loud, their symphony of sound music to her ears. Somewhere, a lion roared, warning off other potential challengers to his pride. A leopard hung lazily in the tree, no kill with it, but it was watching for a potential fool to pounce on.

Such detail. He always had such detail about the mental landscapes he could form when she visited him like this. Even absorbed in his self-loathing, he always gave her this gift.

“Well, you did promise you would,” she whispered, mostly to herself, but knowing he would hear. “When we discovered I could use the mate bond to enter your mind at any distance to be with you, you promised you would always remember as much as you could, so I could be with you no matter where you were. The originals were rougher, but you mastered it. You always had a keen eye for detail.”

They never told their children about some of her more dangerous innate witch abilities. Entering another’s mind was dangerous. It was so very dangerous. She wasn’t the only witch born with the natural skill to do this without a spell, but with her power, she could rip someone’s mind to pieces, torture them with nightmares until they went mad. It would be too easy to do so.

There were also beings who could defend themselves from her if she ever decided to attack them on this front. She could name a few, whispers of names on the wind, like the young Queen of the Nagas. Names powerful enough that they impacted the very magic of the world, forever marking the invisible landscape with their abilities.

Her father had been one of those beings, the curse so greatly shielding him that she found it impossible to even brush up against his mind and its defenses without him

noticing. She had learned that early on and never made the mistake again. She also never used it in war, not wanting to reveal it due to the downsides. It left her vulnerable. Her body was home sleeping because she was not in it.

She had only shared a hint of this great power with her eldest son, and she had been careful not to show too much, only doing what was absolutely necessary to save her son's heart and the woman who held it. Jabari was uncurious about magic and that was the only time in his life she had been grateful for that. She had never wanted to show too much to her children.

Subira had never wanted them to fear her. There was always some intelligent fear they had for her, but she was so very careful not to give them enough fear to run from her. A flash of fear could be overcome. If they knew how easily she could crack through the natural defenses of someone's mind and rip their sanity to pieces from the inside, they would fear her beyond what a mother's love could soften and heal. It would permanently destroy the bonds she so desperately wanted to have with them.

She and Hasan decided to keep this between them. She used her power to close the gap between them when the physical distance was too far for them. He was once a rogue, wandering the world until a small soul needed his help, and he brought the child home. She never needed to miss him. He was always right there, just across the mate bond, and her mind could so easily slip into his, and they could share this together.

She looked back at the hut and sighed.

Due to some quirk of her ability, the mate bond, or the two combined, she couldn't actually read Hasan's mind. He opened the door, and while she was in his mind, she didn't have full power here to change the scene or to know his thoughts. Others wouldn't be able to defend against her knowing everything, but going through the mate bond didn't give her full access, and she had never entered his mind any other

way. It could have been a number of other things as well, like an accidental limit she had put on herself and found no way to overcome. It wasn't an active attempt on his part, that much she knew with certainty.

She knew what he had done here, communicating enough without opening his mouth. This was her place, a place he was invited to, not the other way around. It might be in his mind, but the hut, the river, and the land were still all hers .

You deviously intelligent man. You can't say anything, but you have shown me everything I need to see right now. You are very lucky I love you as much as I do.

She went back into the hut, finally ready to deal with the problem.

"Enough of this," she snapped, grabbing one of the silver chains and pulling. It didn't burn her hand, but the smell of what it did to him hit her nose, the memory changing to account for that detail. "You will not soil this place with your self-loathing," she snarled, yanking harder.

He didn't fight, letting her begin pulling the chains off him, but something was fighting her. Not him, but something else. She couldn't see what, and that made her realize something new.

"Crafted this place for us to hide the truth from me, coward?" she hissed as she leaned close to his face. He closed his eyes as he shook his head. She knew that wasn't his intent, but they were meant to be harsh words, not true ones. He had brought her to the place where she had all the power to say the harsh things. Whatever those chains meant, he needed her power and control over him to finally deal with them. That's what the memory had needed to tell her because he had no idea how to ask for help.

"Look at me, Hasan, and show me what really plagues your mind. Show me the truth.

Show me where these chains came from. Don't make me force it from you."

When his eyes opened, they were full of dismay, full of pain, full of hatred for himself, and they were a brilliant and unique gold only three werecats ever had. There were other shades of gold, all more natural, all easier to stare down, but they weren't this gold. The gold eyes of her father, her mate, and her daughter were only theirs.

The scene finally changed, the watercolor scene of their past dripping away as darkness consumed it, and she saw the wraith of grief holding the chains on him. Hands reaching out of the darkness of his mind, forcing him to be chained and alone, attempting to drag him into the darkness, forever lost to her and under the power of the wraith. The wraith wore their daughter's face, warped by rage, betrayal, and pain.

Subira looked at Liza's face on the wraith and felt cold claws rake her heart as it attacked her. It couldn't do real damage. It wasn't a real wraith in the world but a manifestation of the damage her death did to Hasan, one he had kept so carefully hidden from Subira for over a century. Because it had been so carefully hidden, it had become a powerful thing in his mind, and...

"I failed her," he whispered. "And now I'm failing Jacky."

And it was being fueled by the damage it wreaked through him.

"No and yes," Subira growled, staring at the wraith. She had loved Liza. Sweet Liza.

This was not Liza.

Grief and guilt had eaten at Subira for a long time as well, but she grew up in a harsher reality than Hasan. Hasan believed he could keep their children safe, and when they weren't, it was directly his fault. Subira was not so foolish. She knew if her children got themselves in a dangerous position, she only had so much power.

She could train them and pass along what wisdom she had, but it was their job to use it.

Once they demanded independence, they had to deal with the consequences of that independence. She could pick them up, brush them off, and offer help when and where she could, but she couldn't be everywhere and do everything. She expected that of no one, not even herself. They had to face their own challenges, to overcome and grow from what they faced in life or fall.

Liza had fallen. It had broken their hearts.

But in the end, she had fallen, not because they had failed her, but because she did not heed them.

"I told her that her soft heart was beautiful, but she needed to be ready to defend herself," Subira snarled. "I told her to stop skipping training sessions because her heart wasn't in the violence. I told her that she had to be willing to fight for those she loved and for herself. You told her all the same, Hasan. While it was tragic, it was not our fault she died."

"You will not blame?—"

"It was hers!" Subira roared in his face, cutting off the weak, loving father argument he wanted to counter her with. "She had years of training. She had years of education. She grew up in our family. She thought her name and relation to us would let her live peacefully. She was a naïve idealist, and we loved her for it, but we never looked away from the truth of our world, even in our most hopeful moments. She did ." Subira yanked the chains harder, gaining ground on the wraith. She could remember the arguments with Liza. She would stomp her foot and say she hated training, thought violence was unnecessary, that she could just talk to people, and that there was no reason she had to hurt anyone. "She didn't want to face reality."

“How could you?—”

“Hasan, listen to me. No, she didn’t ask werewolves to attack her. No, she didn’t want to die and leave us like that. She didn’t deserve any of it. Not the pain she faced or left behind.” Subira grabbed his face with one hand while the other kept pulling the chains against the wraith. She was an old werecat. Her form was small in both forms she could take, but she was over five thousand years old. There was very little that could match her power physically, not just magically. With one hand, she could force a standstill.

“None of us asked for this,” she whispered to her mate. “But you cling to responsibility and guilt that went to the grave with her. There was nothing we could change. We tried, Hasan. We tried. We did our very best for her.”

“I could have killed all those werewolves first,” he whispered, his gold eyes glittering queerly in a way she despised to her core, as the wraith reached down and sank claws into his chest instead.

She slapped him, which shocked him and the wraith enough to let her pull an entire coil of chains off him. The claws left his chest.

“That is enough of that,” she said, her menacing tone making him rock back in fear that filled her nose. It would fade. She was never worried about making him too afraid of her. “Don’t think I won’t completely obliterate you if I have to.” The fear grew a little stronger. “Don’t think I won’t turn you to dust if it means protecting everyone else from this .” She yanked the chains hard, nearly pulling the wraith over him. “This is killing our family more than anything else, Hasan!”

“I don’t know how to let go,” he said, his voice suddenly rougher, his eyes filled with tears he would never shed in front of his children.

She saw yearning in those tear-bright eyes.

Oh, he wanted to. He wanted to let go so badly. He knew what this wraith was doing. The knowledge was there. He was a smart man. He knew, and he felt powerless.

“I’m sorry. I hurt my daughter,” he said. And then the broken sob, revealing just how powerless he felt under the weight of everything he carried for all of them. “Like he hurt his daughter. I’m so sorry.”

The words made her heart hurt in an incomprehensible way, but it was a pain she could endure. She had endured worse. There was also a measure of guilt in her heart.

He might feel powerless, but that’s why I’m here.

He was spiraling in despair. The wraith was the most recent haunting, but it wasn’t the most powerful. She had accidentally fed the real monster that kept the world dark for her mate. In her rage at the incident in Germany, she had fed an insecurity in him that she had watched him battle for thousands of years. Now, she needed to fix that, taking her sense of ownership over this problem.

“No, not like he hurt his daughter,” she whispered. “I will kill you before you ever hurt one of our daughters the way he hurt me. I will do the same for our sons. I’ll be their protector from your darkest instincts and feelings, the ones you hate in yourself.”

Something in her mate eased, and it was all she needed. She exercised her power in a way she never had in his mind. She changed the world around them. He had already given her permission to do so when he took her to that hut. She boxed the wraith and threw it into the darkness. That would mute the pain and feelings it represented until he could naturally step away from it. Then she found the other monster in the dark, forever watching, forever reminding him. Gold eyes that were previously hidden by

the wraith lurking in the darkness. They could have been Jacky's eyes or Hasan's.

The cruelty in them made them her father's eyes. Only he had so much vicious, destructive malice.

"You have no power here. I do," she whispered over her mate's shoulder. Her father's cruel eyes changed as a rumbling snarl echoed around them. She couldn't dismiss him as she had done the wraith. So, she built the hut once more, forming it around them, blocking the view of that monster. Once again, the hut was a private world away from him. Out of her father's sight, where they could make new memories and discuss their plans for their beautiful future. A place where her power and their love reigned supreme.

"And I will be your protector as well," she whispered as she kissed him, giving him all the love and power she had loved him with for roughly five thousand years.

She should have expected it but was still stunned as he turned that kiss into something more sexual than she intended. Without the chains, he began to reach for her, but the hut was wavering, the image fighting hard to hold itself together.

Her mate was insatiable. Everyone knew it.

He was also exhausted. She could stay, but he was going into dreams, and those were a different thing altogether to deal with.

"Stop that," she murmured, now that they were safely in her hut, no chains in sight. "Go to sleep, love."

His weak protest didn't even form a word.

With a smile, she saw the scene collapse, and the dreams began. She stepped out, her

mind and magic slipping back through the mate bond.

Her eyes opened in her home, staring at the ceiling. If she successfully brought some balance to him, they had a chance of winning the war to come without losing everything they held dear in the process. She could only wait and see now if she had been able to do enough.

CHAPTER ONE

AUGUST 3RD, 2023

“He has them training hard,” Niko muttered as he leaned on the glass beside me.

“He does,” I said with a single nod, the only acknowledgment I would give to my brother, who I didn’t invite into my house. He just showed up and decided to hang out.

I had been watching the daily training session of the werewolves, Heath and Landon leading them through drills, first in their human forms, then their werewolf forms. With the discussion of war, they had all changed their lives to accommodate the new reality. Every single werewolf with a job quit it, with only a couple of exceptions. They wanted to focus on how to protect themselves, each other, and all of their loved ones. Heath was paying them all a wage now, not just for simple pack duties like the guard shift, but full-time employees, making sure all their needs were met while their careers and livelihoods ground to a halt.

He and Landon remained working, but they were business owners and had to fund the pack. Luckily, both had wealth accumulated over the years. So did I, and I made sure Heath knew he could dip into it if the pack’s finances grew tight. Teagan and Dirk were the notable two still working, outside of the Alpha and his second.

Teagan was still our lawyer, both in human and supernatural law. If we needed him to

argue a case in front of the Tribunal, he would be ready. And it would happen eventually. Eventually, a witch, werecat, or werewolf was going to die, and we would need to answer for that death. Everyone knew a silent war was being waged. There were no armies. There was no violence in the streets. The human world had no idea something was happening. And in wars, people died.

Dirk was still my head of security and was now a recognized member of the werecat ruling family. It didn't matter to me or Niko that he was a werewolf. It didn't matter to most people in the family. He was my nephew, Niko's son, and most importantly, Subira's grandson, and she was the one who made the final call. It was a difficult position for Dirk, who also needed the pack, answered to Heath, and was mated to Landon, but it gave him another layer of protection. It told the world it didn't matter if other werewolves and werecats hated each other. The werecat ruling family claimed this werewolf and would retaliate in the same way as an attack on one of the werecat members. And the family would have help from his pack.

Considering the war was against a group of witches, it was important that at least one group of Moon Cursed could show proper unity. To show that werecats and werewolves worked together for the success and survival of both.

I was feeling confined as I watched them, but I knew I couldn't join. I overpowered everyone in the pack except Heath and Landon, neither of whom could bring themselves to spar with me. Heath because he hated seeing me in pain, even if he accepted the need for me to get more practical training. Landon because he hated pissing off his father, or so he said.

"Stop tapping your foot like that. It's annoying," Niko said, shaking his head.

"Get the fuck out of my house if you have a problem," I snapped in return.

Niko didn't respond as he turned to me slowly, taking me in with a long look that

went up and down my body. If I wasn't his sister, I would have had a hard time deciding if he was sizing me up to kill me or checking me out like I was at a bar.

I was his sister, and he was definitely deciding if killing me for my snappiness would get him in too much trouble with our family.

It made me smile.

Everyone with siblings wanted to kill them sometimes.

"Sorry," I said, losing the smile as I sighed. "I've been in a mood."

"I've heard," he said, crossing his arms. "Dirk says you've been prowling around here and snarling at everyone. That it started when we came back from Alaska and has gotten steadily worse since."

"I'm waiting, and I'm frustrated with waiting," I answered, leaning closer to the large glass windows of my office. The werewolves couldn't see me, but they all knew I was there. I was always there.

"Tomorrow. Tomorrow, Hasan will be joining us and disseminating everything he can from the already ongoing Tribunal investigation into the Dallas incident. Tomorrow, the family gets to work on our own and gets to do things our way," Niko reminded me.

"I know," I said softly. Politics moved slowly. After Dallas, Hasan and I had cornered the Tribunal witches, Matilda and Johann, into helping investigate the family who started all of this and others who might want to enslave the Moon Cursed. Looking back on Alaska, I was certain they either intentionally ignored clues to the situation or were just that ineffective to be properly helpful.

Or perhaps the Tribunal had someone inside who told the witches how to hide from the Tribunal. It didn't have to be Matilda or Johann, even. Every single member of the Tribunal had a large staff, sharing with each other and across most of the supernatural species. There were also people who worked directly for the Tribunal as an organization, where any one of the leaders could pass down orders to someone who worked for the interests of the entire supernatural shadow government.

I also knew that others felt differently than me. Many, including a few in my family, believed the excuse that there were too many witches and too many ways to hide. There were billions of people on the planet. There were millions of witches, ranging vastly in power, expertise, and how much they engaged with the supernatural world. Some had formal training and were involved as deeply in the supernatural world, similar to someone like Hasan. Others were self-taught and used it to live mostly normal human lives with some extra help, staying away from everyone.

Even knowing that rational explanation, I was still furious, always on edge, always looking over my shoulder, wanting blood. I had my reasons for feeling the way I did. Multiple, endless reasons, but only one mattered.

“This werecat was probably no older than Makalo, maybe no older than Carey.”

For that nameless boy. I wanted blood for that nameless boy.

“You just got really pissed off. What are you thinking about?” Niko asked, pushing off from the window we were both leaning on.

“How a boy is dead, and I'm nowhere closer today than I was the day I killed him to finding out who did that to him,” I explained. “Or even his name.”

Niko flinched. He'd been there. I wasn't the only one in Alaska. Niko and Davor had also been asked to help me find the werecat in the Last Change and deal with the

problem.

“Davor is the one looking for who he was and where he came from,” Niko said, no longer looking at me. “We have to trust that if there’s a crumb or clue out there, he’ll find it and follow it. Or he’ll put out the right feelers and hope an elusive werecat admits they lost their son. They’ll answer, knowing his words are really coming from Hasan and Subira.”

“Isn’t there any sort of magic Subira could do?” I huffed. I wasn’t angry with her. I was just angry.

“Ask her tomorrow. She might not have had a spell when this happened, but she might have been working on something since it happened.” Niko shook his head, a sad move that conveyed everything about how he felt about the boy. “We normally know. We might not monitor and know every human child under the care of a werecat, but once someone makes the Change or if they’re born a werecat, we know. Normally, the adult introduces a child to whoever lives closest, a point of contact to the family, so we know there’s another werecat out there. We don’t know them all well, but we learn their name, say hello.

“For many werecats, that’s the closest they ever come to knowing our family. They make their own friends, find a territory or run rogue, and we don’t need to remember them unless they come up as a troublemaker.” Niko closed his eyes, shaking his head again. “A young werecat like that? We normally know. People would tell us just to celebrate their good fortune of having a baby that was a werecat instead of a human. We definitely would have been told when he went missing from his family. Anyone who talked to his family would have reached out if his parent or parents were missing...” His eyes opened once again.

“Because even if we’re solitary, going completely off the grid is a recipe for trouble,” I said, nodding as I recognized his point. “Easier to get killed or captured without any

help. Lack of resources or important news. The gossip-mongering web of the werecats is how we spread information they need to know.”

“Exactly. The fact that this boy is a mystery...” Niko’s low growl revealed I wasn’t alone in my feelings. “Yeah, it’s frustrating, Jacky, but you can’t take it out on everyone. We’re all upset.”

“Yeah,” I mumbled. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, counting to ten, trying to center myself. “Tomorrow, we’ll have our orders.”

“It’s not that we haven’t started yet,” Niko pointed out. “I’ve been talking to everyone I know, and so has everyone else. You put out a message to every werecat in the Americas to help identify that young werecat. We’re not sitting idle on that front.”

Outside, the werewolves launched into a particularly vicious training fight. I saw that it was Ranger, who, even on three legs, was able to really give Shamus’ kids, working as a pair, a hard fight. He was a fair bit bigger and had several decades of experience on them.

“And tomorrow, we begin working on the rest,” Niko said softly. “I never thought I would see a three-legged werewolf give a couple of healthy ones such a hard time. Speaking of your werewolves, has Heath considered what he’s going to do? I know Hasan is talking with Callahan and Corissa about their side of the investigation. They’re looking for who those werewolves were, when they might have gone missing, and how long they’ve been under the radar. They’re also making sure there are no packs still working with any witches who haven’t been proven trustworthy. We’ll find out more about it tomorrow.”

“Heath and I were going to talk to you later today about it, actually,” I said. “Why don’t we wait for him to come in from their training before I jump into it?”

“Absolutely.” Niko stepped back from the window finally, leaving me to my watching, but he didn’t leave me alone. “Why hasn’t Dirk been out there? He hasn’t said anything to me about it, and I don’t want to ask him, but that’s his pack. He should be out there.”

“The same reason I haven’t been training with the werewolves. The Everson men don’t want him to get hurt.” I snorted. “Well, it’s a little different for Dirk. I can only really train with Heath and Landon, but Heath doesn’t want to hurt me himself, and Landon doesn’t want to piss off Heath when we’re all on edge. Dirk isn’t even close to the oldest or strongest werewolf. Landon would maim someone who accidentally hurt him in training. Heath sees no reason to push Landon like that and risk someone’s safety.”

“Do you and Dirk want that sort of training? I know you were trained to fight as a werecat by Hasan, and you’re more than effective in that form, so you don’t need that training,” Niko said, nodding to the werewolves, who were fighting in their wolf form at that moment. “But other kinds. Weapons, hand-to-hand...”

“You trained Dirk in that before he Changed, didn’t you? You taught him to fight the human way.”

“I did. He needs more experience in his wolf form, and I can’t do that for him... Well, maybe I could. I know those types of drills. I grew up watching them. I know them from fighting against them, too.”

“Not afraid of hurting him?”

“Not really,” Niko said, chuckling. “Do you think Hasan was ever afraid of hurting you when teaching you to fight in werecat form? Did he ever actually hurt you worse than bruising and a few cuts that would heal in the Change?”

I thought back to those years living with Hasan, and while I didn't notice it at the time, Hasan had been exceptionally gentle considering his size and power when I was a freshly Changed werecat.

"No, he never really hurt me." I chuckled sadly. "Of course, he was gentle with his new daughter..."

"He was the same way with me. I'm experienced enough to do that with Dirk. They'll never know if you and he don't tell them. Let me train Dirk in that. I can make sure he gets some experience in his wolf form."

"Do you think they're being a little too soft on us?" I asked, humor and annoyance filling my words. I was a little annoyed, but not enough to fight with Heath about it. "Or on Dirk specifically?"

"No," he said, letting me take that in with a long silence. With my eyebrows rising quickly, he continued. "I think they're right in their call with Dirk. It was actually the answer I was hoping for. Werewolves don't Change people they love; they ask another werewolf or an Alpha they trust. After that, they have severe issues with sparring and play fighting becoming dominance fights that can be deadly. Any insult or perceived insult in training, like a bite too hard or a mean tackle, can become a vicious, bloody fight. Heath and Landon have to make sure all of those werewolves don't do that to each other, and with them, they don't have personal skin in the game."

"With Dirk, Landon wouldn't approach it rationally. He'll kill someone. Because of what he is, Heath wouldn't be able to physically stop him in time like he could toss most of them around. He could throw out an order, but werewolves like Landon can toss that aside sometimes if the need is great enough. Well, every werewolf can when they feel the need is great enough, but it would be a lot easier for Landon. With everyone on edge because of what's been going on with the witches, it's too much of a risk."

With a sigh, I nodded in understanding after I silently listened to his explanation, not wanting to break his chain of thought by interrupting. He answered any question I had as I thought of it.

“Come train with me,” Niko said simply before I could think of anything to say.

“What?” I blinked a couple of times.

“Train in hand-to-hand and weapons with me. Give yourself something to do when you’re feeling moody, like you have been today. Get that excess energy and emotion out by working your body. Plus, you need it.”

“I have been doing just fine over the past few years,” I retorted, feeling a bit talked down to.

“You fight like you are brawling in a bar. You don’t know how to properly use a dagger, sword, spear, or anything of the like, which will come in handy in the future, I promise. You need to be able to wield some iron or silver, Jacky. I’ve seen you fight a few times now. You are exceptional as a werecat. In your human form, you struggle because you aren’t proficient with anything. I won’t be able to get you that good very fast, but you need some basics because anything Hasan might have taught you about fighting in human form has either been forgotten or is rusty beyond belief.”

I growled softly, disliking his judgment of my fighting abilities. I wasn’t dead; therefore, I thought I was doing just fine.

“You can bring Dirk over tomorrow afternoon. We’ll begin training after the family meeting.”

“I didn’t agree.”

“Don’t make me tell our mother,” he quickly retorted as he turned away, humor in his words.

I had nothing to say to that. He would. She would agree with him, and I would have no defense. While my ego was stung, he wasn’t wrong. I did fight mostly on instinct, not skill, like most people.

“Saturday. We’ll come over on Saturday to start.” I leaned over, knowing someone had been hanging out for the entire conversation just outside the door. “Dirk, did you hear that?”

“Yeah,” my nephew mumbled a little petulantly from somewhere in the living room.

Niko, his hearing just as keen as mine, chuckled at his son as he opened my office door and stepped out.

CHAPTER TWO

I watched the werewolves train until it was lunchtime, listening to Dirk and Niko discuss other things quietly in my living room. I didn't follow with my full attention as they reviewed the security system Dirk was installing on the home Niko purchased. I liked his home but it was too close to my territory for him to make his own, much to my chagrin. Finally, Heath looked at my office, a sign that they were about to wrap up. He quickly dismissed the werewolves from the day's training, and they scattered. As I watched him walk out of view, I heard cars and trucks turn on and begin leaving. In my head, through my magical connection with my territory, I felt all of them move away from my home except Heath and Landon.

I didn't bother Heath immediately. I heard him say hello to Niko and Dirk, then head upstairs. Landon went into the downstairs bathroom after seeing Niko and Dirk and claimed that shower while Heath went to our bathroom.

With both showers running, I stepped out of my office and went into the living room.

"Niko, you need a territory. We've talked about this."

"Well, with things going on, it's good we're so close to each other. If something happens, I'm here in twenty or thirty minutes instead of a few hours." Niko was relaxing on my couch like he lived there.

I thought we came to an agreement about this. Damn it, the moment he found an

excuse to stay right outside my territory, he took it.

I swallowed anything I could think of saying to him. I only stared at him, making my displeasure clear.

“Well...” Dirk started standing up, cleaning up some folders and documents he’d spread all over my coffee table. “I’ll let the two of you talk about this...”

“I know you heard us earlier, but you should probably stay to tell Landon and Heath that you want to train with Niko,” I said quickly, causing him to freeze for a moment. He gave up on organizing his stuff to leave and fell back onto my couch.

“It would be a lie to say I want to,” he said, sighing. “But it’s something I have to do. I need to be good at fighting as a werewolf. It’s really unlikely Heath would ask me to do any sort of fight in werewolf form because of my other responsibilities and expertise, but it would be stupid not to prepare as much as I can.”

“Perfect. You can say that to them,” I said with a smile. Sitting in the armchair, I turned my eyes back to my brother. “You want to be a rogue, don’t you?”

“I would prefer if you left me alone about it.” Niko relaxed further, spreading his legs out.

Wow. I really thought we had this settled...

“Fine,” I said, shaking my head in frustration. I kicked one of his feet. “This is still my house. Don’t take up all the space.”

He moved his foot out of my range.

Landon came out first, showering and dressing fast since he didn’t live with Heath

and me. Landon bought a house some time ago as Carey was getting older, and Dirk moved in with him when they got together. Dirk had been living with Oliver, who was now living alone, happily staying away from all the supernatural parts of the world he worked in. I had a monthly meeting with Oliver about Kick Shot, but I tried not to talk to him about the more dangerous things happening. The bar was monitored through the security system and the werewolves on guard duty also knew if a problem happened there, they could get involved to help.

“Unofficial meeting?” Landon asked, looking between us as he continued to rub his head with a towel.

“Somewhat,” I said as he went to Dirk, leaning over to kiss him.

“All right. Can I throw my stuff in your laundry and just stay through dinner?” Landon looked back at me to ask.

I heard the upstairs shower turn off as he asked.

“Wait for Heath’s before you run it. He’ll be down soon.” It was just their workout gear, so it would all fit together.

“And make sure you do a good smell test before it goes in the drier. Recently, Heath and I have found we have to run his twice.”

“Understood,” Landon said as he went into the laundry room.

“Yeah, we do the same at home,” Dirk said, groaning. “The heat and the sweat. Humans probably wouldn’t catch it, but it’s still there.”

“Yeah, the worst part about the sensitive nose. We do more laundry,” Niko said with a chuckle. “You and Jacky need to be grateful for the machines. I’m sure Heath and

Landon remember the days when we had to do it all by hand.”

“Those were bad days,” Heath said as he came down the stairs. I smiled at him and like Landon and Dirk, my werewolf came to give me a kiss before he went to throw his workout clothes into the washing machine. He came back out with Landon and looked over the room.

“There’s obviously something that needs a discussion, but first, I need to fix this.” He waved a hand at the room. “Dirk and Landon, loveseat.”

Dirk moved over and met Landon there, neither of them saying anything. I was already standing, knowing what was coming.

“Niko and Jacky, switch places.”

Niko rolled his eyes, but he didn’t argue. It was the eye roll of a man who knew what Heath was doing. He thought it was typical Alpha werewolf behavior, but he wouldn’t defy it.

I leaned on Heath as we sat on the couch together, putting up my feet as he wrapped an arm over my shoulder.

“Much better,” Heath murmured in my ear before kissing my temple. He relaxed and looked around. “What are we doing today? Tomorrow is your family meeting, so I know there are at least a couple of things that need to be talked about.”

“Dirk and I are going to train with Niko since we haven’t been able to join the pack’s training,” I said without any sort of preamble. “Niko also wanted to know what you’re planning to do with the pack with everything going on. I told him it was best he heard it from you.”

“Ah...” Heath looked down at me. “Are you sure?”

“Well, Dirk called Niko here because I was grumpy and bitchy and on edge, apparently. This was a result of that conversation. Yes, I’m sure. I need to be active. He’s going to train me in hand-to-hand and weapons.”

“Okay,” Heath whispered, leaning down to kiss my forehead again. “I’m sorry the pack and I couldn’t do that for you. When are you going?”

“Every day starting Saturday,” Niko answered quickly. “Unless Jacky and Dirk both have something to do that day out of her territory. They’ll still have to show up if the other is busy.”

I finally looked at Dirk and Landon, knowing it was time for Dirk to speak up. It was Landon’s face that stopped me from forcing my nephew into the discussion. I paid attention to my nose. While figuring out the scents there, Landon met my gaze.

“No,” he declared simply, an attempt to end the entire discussion.

“Dirk already knows hand-to-hand and weapons. I’ll be getting him into his werewolf form to give him more practice and experience?—”

“No,” Landon repeated, cutting Niko off succinctly enough to stop my brother’s train of thought. His eyes went to my brother, holding a defiant stare. I thought Niko knew Landon well enough at this point, but I had been wrong. He stared at Landon as my brother’s frustration grew with Landon’s stare back.

Dirk was sinking, unsure how to manage what was happening. He hadn’t had a chance to say anything before Landon put a stubborn foot down and now he didn’t know how to deal with his higher-ranking mate and his father giving each other looks that could kill.

I tapped Heath's knee, a silent request for him to step in. He sighed as he grabbed my hand in his. I was asking him to pick a fight with his son to help his son's mate.

"Dirk, to best help your pack, I order you to train with your father every day you are available to do so."

Landon's snarl made his anger explode in the air, suddenly becoming the strongest smell in the room.

"That's enough, Landon. You've been more protective with everything going on, but that's enough. Dirk needs the training, and you won't let me give him private lessons with other pack members. Niko is centuries older than both of us and has the ability to train with his own son." Heath released my hand, and I felt him move, so I pushed up to give him freedom of movement. He leaned closer to Landon on the loveseat, only a few feet between them. "And if I can accept Jacky needing her own training when I'm unable to handle training with her, then you can do so with Dirk."

"Jacky isn't your?—"

"Finish that sentence, and I will kick your ass across Texas," Heath snarled in return, his temper flaring properly now, overriding even Landon's anger.

I leaned away from Landon and Heath, the verbal slap Heath tried to stop Landon from delivering still hitting its mark.

He's right. He and Dirk have the mate bond... While Heath and I don't, even after several years together.

Whatever showed on my face, whatever emotion was being carried in my scent, caused all of them to look at me. I looked away, refusing to meet any of those gazes.

“I’ll go for a run,” Landon said softly, getting up and moving to the door.

“Do that,” Heath whispered, the potential of violence a promise in his tone.

“I’ll go get him some extra clothes to change into,” Dirk said, starting to stand.

“No, he’ll run home and get his own,” Heath corrected. “He can drive your truck here to get back if he’s not feeling up for running back. Or he can just stay home,” Heath finished in another deep, chest-vibrating growl.

I knew Landon wouldn’t be back until tomorrow.

“We’re having steaks for dinner. Dirk, you are going to stay for dinner. Niko, you are more than welcome to,” Heath continued, making sure Dirk wouldn’t be going home to comfort Landon until much later.

“Plus, someone needs to take his laundry home when it’s done,” I added, swallowing at my fiancé’s anger. Heath’s eyes fell on me. “Or he can pick them up tomorrow when he comes for training,” I quickly said, shrugging.

“Either works for me,” Heath said simply, and the tension released everyone in the room. He leaned back on the couch and seemed to get comfortable. I didn’t lean back on him, but I relaxed, trying to recover from the hurt Landon just gave me and the aftermath of it.

“Let’s move on,” Niko said softly. “I was asking Jacky earlier about your plans in the future for you and your pack and the fight we’re getting into with the witches.”

“Yes, that’s right.” Heath stretched his legs out this time. “Let’s get one thing settled before we get into that. Dirk, you have to know when to speak up with Landon. I know you’re capable of it. You share a mate bond with him, so you can feel certain

things through that. You have a much better chance to bring him down from the ledge of being stupid than anyone else, even better than I do now as his father and Alpha.”

“It just happened so fast, Heath.” Dirk rubbed his chest like he was trying to force his muscles into relaxing. “I didn’t think he’d get like that from training with my father. Now that I know, I’ll talk to him tonight when I get home. I didn’t appreciate it any more than anyone else here. I’m a grown man who can decide things for myself.”

“Good. The werewolf side of things also complicated things, I’m sure,” Heath said gently. “He’s the second most dominant wolf in the pack, and no one challenges him, not even me most days. We’ll talk more about it after dinner before I send you home.”

“Of course, sir,” Dirk said with a nod, looking at Heath with an immeasurable amount of respect.

“Now, we can get to what you want to hear, Niko.” Heath crossed his legs, an ankle on his knee, the picture of relaxation and ownership over the space. I wasn’t sure I was still needed for this next conversation, so I waved Dirk to come with me as I stood.

“Can you stay?” Heath asked me before I got farther. “He might want your input on how you feel about this.”

“I think I’m going to make a few sandwiches and potato salad for lunch. I can hear you from the kitchen.” I smiled. “Unless you don’t want lunch. Because I don’t have to make you lunch. I can just make my own.”

“Trust a werecat to remind me that I’m not fully in charge,” he said with a chuckle.

“Exactly.” I leaned to kiss him before I went to the kitchen, Dirk following me. I put

him to work to get his hands busy and his mind in the present, so he could fret and worry about Landon later. I wasn't a werewolf, but I was getting very good at handling them at certain moments. Werocats were toxically independent, so there had been months and months of adjustment, but I found simple ways to show them acceptance and love. Giving them something to do to help me was an easy one.

"I plan on the pack being the permanent guard of Jacky's territory," Heath started. "Before you question the need for that, I'll give you some history behind my choice."

"I look forward to hearing this, because a lot of werocats will see it as a sign of weakness for Jacky. So long as she handled her own problems, they were able to ignore the werewolves."

I knew Niko would think that much like anyone else in his position would, which meant pretty much my entire family. It was something Heath and I had discussed at length. When he and I were finally ready to act on it, Heath made sure everyone in the pack was okay with it.

He didn't have to press the pack at all about it. Considering how they became the werewolf pack they were, it was only natural for them to help now like this.

"Jacky and I were the ones who were driven into action against the Dallas werewolf pack and the witches who tried to take control. Those witches discovered the potion or whatever it is to hide the scent of magic from our noses."

"Subira and Zuri have been working on that again, not that we have a recipe. I think we'll get an update on it tomorrow," Niko said softly. "Sorry, continue."

"Even before that, it was Jacky and I who ruined their first plans with the coup in Dallas as I was trying to step down. We're the ones who took it to the Tribunal, which put it on the map for everyone. Then in Alaska, Jacky gets the attention of a

powerful witch, or warlock since it was a man. I think she's going to be an easy target for any witches who want to retaliate against our new movement to shut down their attempts to control us. She's the youngest of your family. She's vulnerable due to her activities in the supernatural world, making her a known figure that can cause some trouble." Heath took a deep breath.

"And then there's the fact that some werecats who dislike your family taking the current turmoil as a chance to lash out and try to send a message about the ruling family they might despise. We've seen it happen once before, and current events could give another the idea that they can try."

There was silence as I finished pulling out everything from the fridge. Dirk was the one making the potato salad because I knew he didn't know how. It required him to read the recipe and pay attention, making it even harder for him to think about Landon and what happened in my living room.

"I agreed with him, Niko," I called out softly for both of them to hear in the living room. "It might do something to my reputation, but it's better than getting killed or taken by someone finding me without a guard. The pack was already guarding the house and territory for other types of threats... other werewolves, fae, and the like. They're just taking it over entirely. If a werecat comes to challenge me for the territory, I'll still fight, but if I go down, the werewolves will protect their home as well. This place can't be taken from all of us." I chuckled. "And if they cheat by bringing friends like the last time, then I get to have my friends, too."

"Fair enough." Niko kept his tone conversational. "I feel it's not the only reason for you, though."

Not Heath, I realized. Me.

"Unity. We're dealing with people who want to capture and control Moon Cursed.

Werewolves and werecats have to work together because we're more vulnerable without the skills and magic of both species. Heath and I can prove how we can do that," I explained. "Witches may be less likely to try more attacks like what happened in Dallas if we show them that our people are working in tandem. The Tribunal is one example. Heath and I will be another."

"Enough said, then. I need to think about this. I'm living close by, so whatever comes from this decision you two made will also splash onto me. I might have some ways to mitigate and lessen the problem with enough time to think about it."

"We'll consider your suggestions when you have any. I'm telling the rest of our family tomorrow." I kept working on the sandwiches, not worried about this. It wasn't like any of them could stop me. We had enough on our plates without infighting over what my werewolves were going to be doing. "You could just support it. Plus, your son is a werewolf in Heath's pack, so it's not like you can outright avoid this. Everyone knows they can't ask you to disown Dirk, and he's a werewolf."

"I never said I didn't support it," Niko said quickly.

"Why don't we have lunch and let Niko have the time he needs to think?" Heath said, ending the conversation effectively with a subtle jab at Niko that made Niko chuckle.

I brought the lunch, engaging in the mild conversation while tracking a wolf who was running like his life depended on it in the back of my mind.

CHAPTER THREE

I waved at my brother as he drove off, letting the men clean up the mess from lunch. I tried to ignore the whispering between Heath and Dirk, knowing the conversation was private. Niko hadn't spoken at all about the incident with Landon, pretending as if it didn't happen, and I didn't bring it up. Now, Heath was taking a chance to really talk to Dirk while I saw Niko off. I had hoped Heath would wait until after dinner, but since Niko decided not to stay all afternoon, it was better to give Dirk the advice he needed now rather than later.

It wasn't over by the time Niko disappeared from view, so I waited until I felt Niko leave the territory. Once I no longer had that to focus on, I turned my attention to the conversation to check what was going on before I went back inside.

"Dirk, you can't let him?—"

I tuned back out, sighing heavily.

"I'm going for a walk," I said loudly.

"Take your phone," Heath replied instantly, cutting himself off from whatever he and Dirk were trying to work through about Landon. "Call anyone in the pack if you need anything."

"I have it." I hopped down the steps and started in a specific direction.

Landon's.

I knew where Landon was on his run. I had felt it the entire time we ate lunch. It had been nearly an hour, and he was still going. He kept a grueling pace for his run, pushing his endurance, going around the woods, down streets, and through neighborhoods. He was either taking the most winding path back to his house possible, or he was really beating himself into the ground about his comment.

I walked in the beginning, even taking a moment to grab a bag from the security building with basic medical supplies and water we kept on hand if a wolf got hurt in training. I wouldn't catch up to him, but since I had spent an hour tracking his movement through my territory, I had a feeling I knew where I could head him off. There was something predatory to the feeling, planning an ambush of prey that had no idea it was running straight into my trap. The way Landon was running told me there was little planning to it, but that didn't mean there wasn't a pattern.

There was always a pattern, and I knew the area better than anyone, not needing a map to know what he was near at any given time. He was avoiding densely populated areas where people would be walking around, like grocery stores or gas stations. He was going around them, dipping back into the trees every time one blocked his path. He went into quiet neighborhoods but wasn't jumping through backyards, just a man running instead of trespassing. Much of the land was owned by different people, but generally we were never caught on their land and left very little evidence if we could.

Once I was out of sight of the house, I started to run. Feeling the direction he was moving and taking my own shortcuts through my territory, it only took me twenty minutes to get where I wanted to be. My senses went on high alert as I made sure I would be downwind of him as he passed. He'd catch my scent in this part of the woods, but it was always there. He'd have to be paying attention to figure out how recent it was.

There, I waited another five minutes for the soft breeze to send his scent to me. It took another minute to hear his heavy breathing.

I stepped onto the trail, putting my hands in the pockets of my comfortable leather jacket, and waited, knowing by the time he saw me, it would be too late for him to avoid me. Even if he turned and ran, I was practically fresh, and he wasn't. He was physically stronger than me now, but not faster, and he was quite literally run into the ground already.

Then I saw him make that turn and watched his surprise as his heels planted into the soft dirt so hard, there were drag marks as he forced his momentum to a hard stop. I knew it was the first time he stopped since he walked out of my house.

"Feeling better yet?" I asked, keeping my body relaxed, even as adrenaline pumped. My ambush had worked, and I was a predator. It was a thrill, certainly, but I didn't want to indulge the adrenaline and make this into something it wasn't supposed to be. "Or do you need to keep running for another hour and a half until you collapse in the middle of nowhere to be satisfied?"

It was like a damn breaking. He was barely breathing while I spoke, utterly shocked I had gotten the proverbial jump on him. Then he was breathing hard, chest heaving as his body caught up to the abuse he was giving it. He was running too hard, too fast, to maintain it for as long as he had. His pace was meant for sprints, not the insane endurance run he was putting himself through. I knew from experience that what he was doing was something really only done when a life depended on it.

He staggered, but as I took a step forward, he waved me off as he found a tree to lean on. I stayed silent as he leaned his back on that tree, using it to help him get to the ground without falling. Once he was seated, I stepped closer again. He didn't say or do anything to stop me this time, so I approached him, kneeling in front of him.

“Let me see your feet,” I said softly, already reaching for his shoes. He grumbled, but I could tell how much he pushed himself. He offered no fight as I yanked off a shoe, then a sock. My nose should have found it offensive, but I truly didn’t care. Sweaty people were a common scent, and there were things you learned to stop caring about, like feet.

Looking over the bleeding sores he had covering his feet, I clenched my jaw. It wasn’t common for that to happen to older or experienced Moon Cursed, but Landon wasn’t wearing running shoes and that was a mistake. He had on a nice pair that meant he probably had a work meeting he had now missed. Normally, a good pair of fresh running shoes could handle this, or just running barefoot would be the smarter choice. I got the second shoe and sock off, seeing the damage was the same on his left foot.

“Damn, Landon. If you were human, I’d take you to the hospital for this. You can’t let these heal in human form. You need to Change to heal if you want to walk in the next several days.”

“I will later,” Landon said, finally speaking up.

“That’s right. It will be later. Not much later, though. We’re going to talk, then you are going to Change and go home,” I said, patting his knee. I shifted to sit next to him now, leaning on the tree as well. “You’re lucky it’s me here instead of Heath or Dirk,” I said, my tone casual, but the comment was all too serious. It was difficult, trying to be casual through my teeth.

“I know,” he mumbled.

“If your father saw the damage you’ve done to yourself, he’d carry you home and give you an ass chewing while he took care of you.” Even as I spoke, my jaw was beginning to get stiff because I was talking through a clenched jaw. “At least walking

barefoot won't give you an infection, or at least not one that we have to worry about. And it's me, not your father, or gods forbid, your mate .”

Landon winced.

“What the fuck, Landon?” I finally snapped, unable to hold it back any longer.

“I know, Jacky,” he said, leaning away from me. “I’m sorry for what I said?—”

“I don’t care about what you said earlier. I care about what you’ve done to your feet!” I snarled, pointing at the bleeding feet. “You said it. It’s done. I know you’re being an overprotective bully about Dirk’s safety and were trying to one-up your father about why he can let me train but you can’t let Dirk. That’s not the point. Look at what you did to yourself!”

He sank lower, but I saw him look at his feet as I demanded.

“We’ll worry about the bullshit you pulled at the house in a minute.” I hefted the bag off my shoulder and dropped it by his thigh. “Clean them up. There’s saline and water. Drink the water. Use the saline to rinse off sweat and dirt.”

“I know how?—”

“I trust adults to take care of themselves?—”

“I am an adult,” he snarled as I hit a nerve. “I’m over a century older than you!”

“And yet, here we are,” I growled, making him rock back.

I said nothing more. I waited as he opened the bag and did as I asked. He drank some water first, which was room temperature, even a bit warm, but it was water. He

cleaned off his feet with the saline, then used an almost excessive amount of anti-bacterial on the sores before beginning to wrap his feet.

“I’ll do that.” I moved in front of him again and patted my thigh until he put his foot there. I wrapped the right one first, then just grabbed the left. I was gentle with my touch, but I made sure the bandages were going to stay on until he decided to Change.

“Now... about what you said.” I sighed, holding his left foot, not letting him take it back. “It doesn’t matter.”

“It does matter. It was a mean thing to say.” He wouldn’t look me in the eye, but that wasn’t the problem.

“It was the truth. You used it in a mean way,” I correctly softly. “And it’s already forgiven. We don’t need to talk about it beyond that.”

“Did you really come all the way out here to say that? To tell me all is well and forgiven?”

“Yeah, and stop you from continuing to run yourself into the ground. Niko stayed for lunch, and after he left, Heath started talking to Dirk. I decided to come out here looking for you. Told them I was going for a walk.”

“I still don’t want Dirk training with Niko. I don’t want him getting hurt.” Landon’s jaw locked, the muscles twitching from the frustration and stubbornness of the man who was in a very vulnerable position, me still holding his injured foot.

“You want to talk about that?”

“There’s nothing to talk about. He won’t be fighting; he doesn’t need to risk another werewolf or, worse, a werecat taking a chunk out of him,” Landon growled.

“He might be fighting?—”

“He won’t be fighting!” Landon snarled, leaning closer, trying to pull his foot from my hands at the same time. I squeezed, my grip firm and unbreakable. He growled louder.

The hardest part about knowing Landon for a long time was learning how to deal with him in certain situations. I hated how I held his foot. I knew it was the only thing that kept him from storming off. It was the curse and how it changed his temperament from what might be normal for a werewolf. There was something inherently aggressive about all the Moon Cursed. We were cursed, not blessed. Landon’s was magnified thanks to what happened to him when he was young, things I knew his father regretted every time Landon’s rougher edges were too raw to work around. Landon hated himself some days, and I had a feeling he was going to regret this one. Maybe not anytime soon, but one day.

The struggle lasted a solid minute, and I knew I was going to have to replace the bandage on his foot if he didn’t want to Change. It took werewolves more time, so they didn’t do it as frequently as werecats.

He didn’t try to kick me off or anything. He just yanked, and I refused to budge. His tired legs couldn’t put up the fight he wanted, and I was too stubborn to lose to a werewolf about this.

When he finally settled, growling as he glared at me, I sighed again.

“Let’s not play these games, Landon,” I said softly. “There’s no reason for them.”

“He won’t be fighting,” he repeated, ignoring what I had said entirely.

“You’ve seen him fight before?—”

“One time, a werewolf tried to tear him to pieces in my Pa’s house because they wanted to kill you and Pa. The other, his uncle nearly murdered four of us in some fucking fae magical woods bullshit!” Landon said harshly. “I won’t let Pa risk him. I won’t let it happen. He’s too important. He’s mine, damn it, and I won’t see him get hurt when it could be avoided. I’m done indulging bullshit. The witches will have to kill me first to get to him. I’ll keep him safe.”

“Landon—”

“My mind is made up on it, and I’m going to do everything in my fucking power to keep Dirk safe. He’s my mate. He’s my forever.”

I released his foot, and he jumped to his feet quickly.

“I’m going home. You can go home and tell my Pa whatever you want. He can fight with me about it later.” He started walking away, struggling stubbornly on his battered feet. He didn’t care about the shoes or socks he left behind.

“Landon.” I pushed myself up now. “Landon! Talk to me.”

“No,” he said, not even bothering to look over his shoulder at me. “If we’re good about what I said, there’s really nothing else to talk about.”

“What is wrong with you? You’ve never been this protective or frankly this irrational, Landon. You know he’s capable?—”

“The only reason you care about it is so you can stop thinking about the dead kid in Alaska,” he snapped.

That left me stunned, mouth open, yet no words formed to retort or even deny.

“See you tomorrow, Jacky,” he growled, limping away.

I let him go, bewildered as he left me alone on the trail.

That bewilderment evolved into anger as I looked down at the bag I brought to help him.

He left his fucking shoes. Thanks, asshole. Now I have to carry back your stinky damn shoes and socks.

I shoved them in the bag and started heading home.

CHAPTER FOUR

I got back, shoving the door open so hard, its collision with the wall could be heard through the entire house. My anger at Landon didn't abate on the long walk back but rather grew into full fury. I waited for the door to close, and with a snarl, I realized I'd sent the doorknob into the wall. I yanked it out as multiple sets of footsteps moved toward me. I knew one was Dirk, another Heath. One I couldn't feel with magic, but only one human would approach me in a mood, and that meant it was Carey. I got the front door closed, ignoring that it was Heath coming up the steps to catch me and figure out what was wrong. Dirk was right behind him. Carey was coming from her bedroom, having gotten home from her classes.

"Not right now. I'm angry with your brother," I told her as I dropped the medical bag. She froze on the spot, nodded, and turned around, heading back to her room. I reached out to yank Landon's smelly shoes out of the bag, then his socks, tossing the shoes to the door as Heath was opening it, then the socks onto the kitchen floor for someone to put them in the laundry.

"Jacky..."

"Landon may be limping tomorrow. He ran until he fucked up his feet," I growled. "Then he left me with his damn shoes and socks. He's walking home with his feet bleeding but bandaged."

"I see," Heath said softly. "Dirk, get those socks. You can shove them in a gym bag

from the closet and wash them at home with your laundry. Take the shoes, too, though Landon may want to toss them. He's really ruined them."

"Yes, sir," Dirk said, jumping into action at his Alpha's direction. When Dirk got to the shoes, he made a face, and I knew he was smelling the things I had put out of my mind. I had seen Landon's feet, so I knew the cause. The blood and other nasty smells in those shoes told a story of their own, and I hadn't considered how others would react.

"He messed himself up, huh?" Dirk said, swallowing as he put them in the bag.

"Yup," I said curtly, turning to go into the living room. Heath meekly followed me, a thing I never thought I would think about the man I intended to marry. He was many things, but meek wasn't one of them. When I turned on him, he was making a clear effort to seem smaller, gentle, and quiet.

Non-threatening.

"Stop that," I growled, waving a hand at him. "We both know it doesn't suit you, and it's not real."

He didn't change much. His shoulders straightened, his chin went higher, and it was fixed. He was a confident man, Heath Everson. He ruled over other werewolves. He was willing to challenge those far above him, fight for what he believed in, and wasn't afraid of much anything, certainly not me.

"What happened between you and Landon?" he asked, his tone deceptively neutral. He would fool anyone who didn't know him. Anyone close to him, me included, knew that neutrality was him restraining so he could listen to others without them being swayed by his own emotions.

“He’s just being an asshole,” I said with a huff. “He went and ran himself into the ground over what he said about me and you, but he’s still adamant about Dirk not training.”

Heath’s eyes narrowed fractionally, but I noticed.

“How bad is he?” Heath asked in a whisper, and I wondered what I was missing that he understood.

“He’s saying that Dirk isn’t allowed to fight. He doesn’t even want you or me to accidentally put him in the position of fighting. He can’t risk Dirk getting hurt or, worse, dying. It’s borderline irrational because... he’s a werewolf. Dirk’s going to get into fights, eventually. Right?” I questioned, knowing I was on the outside looking in. It didn’t matter how long I lived with the werewolves, there were still times I remembered I didn’t know everything. I was really beginning to wonder if this was one of those moments.

“I see,” Heath said softly, nodding as he turned away, looking out the window.

“He stormed off,” I finished lamely. “I could barely get a word in when Dirk was the topic.”

“Thank you for trying,” Heath said quickly. “I’ll figure this out.”

“What about Dirk? This could?—”

“I am right here,” Dirk said suddenly, and I winced. He was in my house, and I actually forgot he was in the doorway, able to see us in the living room.

“Sorry,” I said, sighing as I looked beyond Heath at the werewolf standing awkwardly as he watched us, the gym bag in hand. “Put that outside to take when you

leave.”

“What about me? Are you worried about Landon and me?”

“No!” I looked desperately at Heath for him to step in. I tried my best not to meddle in their relationship, to the point that half the time, I never knew what Dirk and Landon were even doing on most days or if they even went on dates at all. I knew they went fishing sometimes, but that hadn’t happened in some time.

“Landon is the problem.” Heath’s look at me as he spoke told me he caught the lie, and I had better hope that Dirk was too far away to smell it clearly. “We spoke earlier. You are a strong individual, and you need to use that to stand on an equal playing field with Landon. Tell him what you want, make it clear, and don’t let him push back for whatever reason. You’ve got a mate bond. He won’t risk hurting you... however, if he tries using his pack position to counter me, please tell me.”

“Yeah...” Dirk nodded, his eyes on me, not Heath.

Damn, he caught the lie.

I looked away, unable to face that.

I should have kept my mouth shut.

“Why don’t you meet him at home? I know I asked you to stay for dinner, but if he’s hurt himself... Don’t pamper him, just be there. Don’t let him stew alone anymore.” Heath waved Dirk out, and Dirk took the chance like someone let him out of a prison cell and he hadn’t seen the sun in a decade. He was in Landon’s truck and gone in less than two minutes.

“I’m so sorry,” I said, rubbing my face in dismay. “I didn’t know it would be a lie

until it was coming out of my mouth.”

“You’re right,” Heath said softly. That made my hand fall again as I looked at him in surprise. “There’s a reason to worry if Dirk can’t talk Landon down.”

“Oh...”

“Keep an eye on them with me.” Heath sank onto the couch. “If Landon doesn’t back off, he’s going to damage their relationship by trying to keep Dirk in bubble wrap. Dirk is intelligent, rivaling Davor when he’s challenged to prove it or it’s a situation where failure isn’t an option. He’s also physically capable, thanks to his father. He’s going to be a formidable werewolf one day, whether Landon or I help him or not. In any other pack, he would have already continued to push the line and fought up in rank without anyone wondering why. He’s smart enough not to get into fatal fights. He’d climb fast in a large pack to a middle-of-the-pack rank if he didn’t start there. He’d be in someone’s inner circle before he was fifty. Probably not a number two, but a solid four or five.”

“You’ve taken some time to really assess him, have you?” I could see it, this Dirk he imagined. The tough young man who showed up on my doorstep, anger in his eyes, a challenge to authority that wasn’t outright against all authority, but a challenge that wanted me to prove mine. He’d had a chip on his shoulder at the time, one we had done our best to repair.

“Absolutely. And all of those things make Dirk the person Landon fell in love with.”

“And Landon is about to smother it.”

“Yes,” Heath whispered, looking away finally. “Idiot son of mine.”

“Is it a werewolf thing, this switch flipped in Landon with Dirk? They were fine

before I went to Alaska.”

“It could be, but Landon isn’t a typical werewolf. We get urges, thanks to the curse rewiring us, just like werecats, yeah?”

“Yeah, we get rewired, too... We need more space and to be alone, even extroverts find themselves turning more introverted or into an ambivert. We can’t help it. It takes work to keep doing public things with multiple people. Too many werecats just detach from society as a whole and only keep very small circles of people they almost never see. It can be exhausting to deal with too many people too often.”

“With werewolves, we crave more pack, but Landon is...” Heath pulled me down to the couch. “Why don’t we just turn on a movie and let Dirk try to handle it? It’s their relationship, not ours.”

I gave no resistance to him pulling me in and kissing my cheek as we properly snuggled.

“Jacky, are you calmed down now?” Carey asked, her voice distant enough to be from her bedroom door, which she didn’t bother to open. She spoke through the door, knowing we would hear it. “I wanted to get a snack while I did homework.”

“Yeah, I’m fine now,” I said, shaking my head as a smile took over my face. I pulled gently away from Heath, whose long-suffering expression stayed as Carey came out, passing us to the kitchen. She got her snack and stopped behind the couch as I tried to find a movie to watch with Heath.

“I don’t have class tomorrow. Are you going to watch anything good? I could use the break from homework,” she said, hopeful she could join us.

Heath waved her to sit down as he sighed. All I could do was laugh as all the

thoughts of what he would do just with me left his head, lost to spending time with his mortal, human daughter, who was growing up too fast for him.

“So, Landon was being an asshole. I mean, we all know he had it in him,” Carey said as she fell onto the couch on the other side of her father.

“Language,” Heath muttered. I shifted around to put my feet on his lap and laughed harder as Carey did the same from the other side. He gestured at our feet, looking between us. “I am an Alpha werewolf reduced to an ottoman.”

“Well, Dad... she’s a werecat, and I’m a human, so... I don’t know why we need to care about you being an Alpha werewolf,” Carey teased, grinning as she spoke.

I needed to slap a hand over my mouth to stop from hooting. Heath slowly turned to his daughter one more time, and I didn’t have it in me to warn her. Heath grabbed her ankle, holding her leg before she thought to pull both her feet away. She screamed in laughter as he tickled her. Her free leg kicked, and her bowl of popcorn was tossed in an attempt to protect herself, though it was an ineffective defense.

I watched, trying to turn my laughter into giggles, so he didn’t turn on me, too. As the movie started, Heath cleaned up popcorn while Carey and I leaned on each other. I fixed her hair, pushing it from her laughter-flushed face, her cheeks warm, her smile endless. Heath tried to wedge himself back in the middle, and we eventually let him.

The next time Landon crossed my mind, I wasn’t angry.

I understood him.

Beyond that, I hated that I was wondering if he was right about me when he stormed off.

CHAPTER FIVE

I was up with Heath at the same time we rolled out of bed every day now, which was too damn early for me. I missed the schedule where I used to stay up too late and got to sleep in. I had gotten used to waking up early for a little while, but some mornings, all I wanted was to stay in bed. The real problem was that Heath was too busy to stay in bed with me and make those mornings more fun right now. He was going to be out with the pack right after breakfast, and he couldn't be late for a bit of fun. It was a bad example for his werewolves, who showed up on time because he set the time.

I was a werecat, so I wondered if that was what possessed me to look at him this morning and act ridiculously.

"We could make it quick," I purred in his ear while we were both in the bathroom. While I knew he would regretfully turn me down, there was a thrill knowing he'd say yes if it weren't for his stalwart need to be as good as he asked the pack to be. It was very clear to me he'd say yes, and it certainly wasn't from the heavy-lidded stare he was giving me.

"You know they can tell when you do this to me in the morning, right?" he asked, leaning in, his lips brushing against mine.

"Oh, really?" I played innocent, but it was hard not to smile for very long, and I didn't feel all that strong this morning, letting it betray my innocent expression.

“I wish there were a day I could just...” He trailed off. “If I say anymore, you will finally succeed in making me late.”

“A girl has to try, right? It’s not like I’m getting any other workouts with you. I need to take them where I can get them.”

“You are in a mood this morning.” Now, he was struggling to keep a straight face, the heat in his eyes telling me that he wanted me as much today as the day he first came over, and we gave up pretending we weren’t into each other. “And I do believe I made sure you broke a very good sweat last night. I remember your heart racing and the heavy breathing, actually.”

That was true.

“I think it was such a good workout for you that you were falling asleep right as it was finishing up, and I had to do all the cleanup,” he continued.

He wasn’t wrong.

It was all the pent-up energy of Carey not leaving us be, not just through one movie but three, with two of them after dinner. He had to send her to bed for the first time in a long time. Normally, Carey knew when to step out and go do her own thing. The moment she went to her own room, he remembered all of those things he was intending to do to me.

It was a good night for me, and it was the only reason I didn’t dream about Alaska and what happened there, not that I felt like I could tell Heath about that.

“Now, with that little rewriting of history you were trying to do corrected, I am going to make you breakfast. You need protein after last night. Or you need it for tonight. Take your pick.”

I snorted as he walked around me, hitting my butt as he went.

I finished getting ready for the day and met him downstairs, where Carey was already waiting for breakfast. Two faces were missing, though. In recent weeks, Landon and Dirk were here for breakfast so Landon and Heath could discuss how each member of the pack was doing, if they were improving, what their strengths were like, and more. Dirk joined in, offering ways to improve the digital security to complement the werewolves, which was ever-evolving. I always got a bit lost and preferred to eat my breakfast with Carey, pretending as if none of it mattered to us. If I paid too much attention, I got cranky, knowing it wasn't helping me solve my problems after Alaska. It was protection, which was good, but it wasn't solving anything for me.

Noticing that Landon wasn't there made me think even more about what he had said to me the afternoon before. It made me think about why I didn't mention the comment to Heath, who frowned when he saw the empty seats where Landon and Dirk normally were.

"Carey, what are you planning on doing today?" I asked, trying to ignore the absence of her brother.

"Well, Dirk and I were planning on going to the gun range when the werewolf training started," she explained. "With no classes today, it's time for me to get comfortable with something to protect myself. Once I turn eighteen, I can carry, and I probably should."

"She's used a gun before," Heath said quickly.

"I know." I chuckled. While I had never taken her to the gun range, I knew she had some experience. This was Carey Everson, the human daughter of a werewolf Alpha. "Started with BB guns, yeah?"

“Yup. Landon taught her to shoot one when she was eight,” Heath explained.

“Yeah, well, I need a lot more practice. It’s been a while. I know it’s because I can’t legally carry, but Dirk is really good, and I asked him to take me, so if something happens at home, I should be able to defend myself.”

For a minute, I was slammed by the maturity and realism of her words. She was sixteen. Only sixteen. It always took me off guard that she was a step ahead of what I was thinking about where she should be. Then the guilt would hit, knowing it was because of what we were that she was so mature.

“What time were you going to go?” Heath asked, glancing at me, a different question in his eyes than the one he had for his daughter.

I leaned back and made it clear I was focused on something else as I considered where Landon and Dirk were, something I could have done earlier. Dirk was on his way already, while Landon was still at home.

“We were planning on spending the whole morning there. He was going to give me experience with all the firearms you have in the safe. Well, one of each.”

“So you can get a good feel for all of them. Smart young man,” Heath seemed proud. “I wish he mentioned it yesterday when he was over.”

“Oh, well, we talked about it last night,” Carey admitted. “Since he doesn’t start training with Niko until tomorrow, he asked if there was anything I wanted to do today without classes. You’re both busy; so is Landon. He didn’t want me to be too bored. This is what we ended on.”

I couldn’t hide my surprise. Dirk was notoriously uncomfortable with Carey, the younger sister of his partner. When she was younger, it was due to that. He didn’t

have experience with children or young teens. He was always getting better, but offering to spend the day with her was a bold step.

“Well... he’s on his way,” I finally said as Carey looked between Heath and me.

“Good! I’ll get ready then. Dirk knows the people who own the gun range and said we could get in before anyone else, so if we felt uncomfortable with people around, we wouldn’t have wasted the entire trip.” She popped out of her seat like a firecracker and went to her room, leaving me with a better-masked but equally stunned Heath.

“That’s certainly a way to start the day. Dirk and Carey are going to hang out... with guns.” I clicked my tongue, thinking about it. With a clear vision of the event, I remembered how Carey punched an older girl and broke her nose once, and I had to get her from the high school that day. “I love her more than life, but you’re certain she won’t shoot someone if she gets temperamental, right? Like people know who she is. If anyone makes any sort of offensive comment, she...”

“I’m... nearly positive she won’t shoot anyone,” Heath said, not nearly as confident as I hoped. “I’ll trust that Dirk will be able to stop her. He’s a werewolf, and he knows her. She also knows all the gun safety rules. She’s not a true beginner, so she won’t be able to use that excuse to try shooting anyone and getting away with it.”

“It’s not that she’s violent, but...” I didn’t feel guilty for bringing it up. Carey could really snap sometimes when someone crossed a line with her.

“She’s protective,” Heath finished for me. He shook off his complicated emotions visibly, like shaking water out of his coat, before focusing his stormy blue eyes on me. “Dirk is on his way... but you didn’t mention Landon.”

“He’s still at his home,” I answered simply. “Dirk is nearly here, so perhaps we shelve the next part of this talk until he and Carey have gone.”

“Interesting that they didn’t leave at the same time,” Heath murmured, frowning. He was lost in his thoughts for a moment before nodding. “We’ll shelve it for the moment.”

We ate breakfast, giving our best smiles to Dirk as he walked in looking too tired for his own good. It wasn’t unsafely tired, but the darkness under his eyes with a distinct lack of morning pleasantness was a sign of something troubling I knew shouldn’t be my problem but would be. However, when Carey walked out of her room, ready to go, I was impressed by the effort Dirk put into presenting himself, hiding the darkness of his mood and smiling brightly at her.

“Ready to go already? You’re quick.”

“I grew up with brothers! And Jacky. She doesn’t need an hour to get ready for the day.”

I blinked a couple of times, knowing it didn’t take me much time because I didn’t wear much makeup, if any, nor did I try to dress myself in any way to impress. I was a notable mess, if I listened to either of my sisters. Carey looked neatly put together, though, like she was taking lessons from Zuri or Mischa. She always did. She was Heath’s daughter. He was all about presentation in that aspect. He was the best dressed on any given day, and while it could seem effortless, it wasn’t. Carey was raised to clean up every day she would leave the house because anything else would draw unwanted attention to their family. Her speed to do so wasn’t because of me or her brothers. It was practice.

“Let’s go then! Heath, I’ll check everything out of the gun safe properly, and don’t worry, she’s in good hands.” Dirk held the door for her, his smile not fading as he matched stares with Heath.

“I know she is,” Heath said with a warm smile.

Once the door closed and the truck was gone twenty minutes later, I watched the warm smile fall off Heath's face. How he managed to hold it that long was beyond me, a truly impressive feat.

"Has Landon left his home yet?" Heath asked, a subtle growl in his words.

"No. Don't do anything. Let him stew if he has to stew," I said carefully, not wanting to see a rift begin to form between them. "He'll come around, right?"

"Did you see that boy? It seems like he was up most of the night, and it wasn't for a fun reason." Heath's growl at the end exposed the depth of his anger at Landon. I leaned back, studying Heath, recognizing that my fiancé's reaction to this was harsher than I would have expected, which meant I needed to figure that out first.

"We don't know what happened," I said carefully, judging Heath's every twitch. "He could have been up all night working on an idea. He could have had too much to think about."

"Or he and Landon argued all night," Heath grumbled, his stormy eyes narrowing as he kept looking away from me. Heath was staring at my front door like he was trying to manifest his son there.

"He didn't look so tired that Carey was in any danger," I stressed. "So, I know you're not pissed because of that."

"I'm not..." Heath finally breathed again. "I'm sorry. Something about Landon's behavior is bothering me. And now he's being intentionally late to training, if he shows up at all."

"Go train your werewolves without him," I said, reaching out to touch his arm. "I have my family meeting today. We'll come back to this in the afternoon."

“I can’t let it slide if he misses training,” Heath said, less furious and more frustrated now. “I’m going to have to discipline him in front of the pack. I hate needing to do that.” He growled again. “I can’t lie to them and say he’s too injured. I know he’s healthy. If his feet hurt, he did that to himself.” He stopped growling and sighed. His scent told me everything about his feelings, not locked away, thanks to his Talent. He was mostly concerned and frustrated, and there was little I could do for him. No one knew Landon better than he did. If he was feeling like he didn’t know what to do or say, there was nothing I could think of.

Landon also made his feelings very clear when it came to me meddling...

“Come here,” I murmured, getting closer to him. I brushed a hand over Heath’s cheek as I kissed him. When I pulled back from the moment, he was more relaxed, his shoulders lowering as he released some of the tension. “I don’t know how to help you or Landon or Dirk right now, but whatever this is, we’ll figure it out. We’ll figure it out, Heath.”

“I know,” he whispered back, leaning in to return my kiss. Once he was done, he leaned over, his head on my shoulder. His arms wrapped around my waist, and I wished I could stay there all day, regardless of the reason. It was a nice place to be. “I... This is the one thing I have no experience in. Landon with a partner, having issues with said partner, both in the family now, a mate bond between them. I have no idea what I’m doing. I don’t know what to say or do, either.”

“From my experience, most children don’t like when their parents try to help their relationships, no matter the age of anyone involved,” I said, trying not to chuckle darkly at the reasons I knew that.

“Yeah...” Heath grumbled.

Since I was constantly aware, I leaned back from Heath, tapping one of his arms still

firmly wrapped around me.

“Your werewolves are coming. Some are only a couple of minutes away. You should get out there and think about what you want to do today without Landon.”

“He’s still not moving?”

I shook my head, and Heath groaned. I knew he had been hoping that Landon would get moving, but I knew otherwise. Landon was, at most, prowling around his house and backyard, not yet on the move toward my property.

Heath walked out, leaving me to wonder how this had brewed under our noses. I had known there was overprotectiveness running a bit rampant, but the bomb that was slowly going off caught me off guard.

It was, truthfully, a distraction I couldn’t afford, yet found myself indulging in. Anything to not think about the werecat or werewolves in Alaska was welcome at this point for me. I hated that thought, though, since Landon and Dirk weren’t distractions. They were a part of my family that I had fought for. The family I was still fighting for.

I watched as Heath met his werewolves in my yard, knowing that Landon and Dirk would be fine in the end. This was just a growing pain for them. It had to just be a growing pain. All relationships had them, no matter what the dynamic was.

I turned to walk to my office, knowing I had to face a growing pain of my own.

CHAPTER SIX

I was early to the family meeting but was pleasantly surprised to see nearly all of my siblings were also early.

“Good morning,” I said, making sure my mic was picking up my voice and that the camera was pointed correctly at me. I didn’t have to fix them very often, but over time, the camera would move slightly, thanks to people running around the house or stomping or slamming doors, which I had done just yesterday. The mic would sometimes disconnect when I had to update my computer. It felt good to fiddle with things before the meeting, keeping my hands busy.

“Good morning, Jacky,” Zuri said first, but I couldn’t see her. “You knocked the display cable, it seems.”

“Actually, power. You’re on my desk monitor,” I said, shaking my head in frustration at what I had just done. Her voice was coming through speakers, and those were thankfully still working. “I slammed some doors yesterday and seemed to have shaken the house a bit more than I thought.”

“Oh?” Jabari’s interest was bad news.

“Not Heath’s fault,” I said quickly, striking that idea from my eldest brother’s mind. Zuri and Jabari loved Heath; I knew they did. They respected my relationship with him and stood their ground with me when Hasan lost it. Their support meant

everything to me.

But Jabari was an older brother, and while I never had one as a human growing up, I knew enough about this particular older brother to know that if Heath made me cry, he would be on the first plane to figure out why. Hisao wouldn't since that would cause its own stir. Niko was around and wouldn't just because he wouldn't.

"That's good," Davor said softly, chuckling. "I would hate to have to hurt the man."

That took me off guard, leaving me wide-eyed as the monitor turned on. Chuckles were filling my office as Davor smiled mildly.

"No, you would cuddle Jacky while I hurt him," Jabari finally grumbled. "But look at her face; you really got her with that."

That made me roll my eyes. Davor and I were doing... better. Much better, in fact. He'd done a lot of work on himself to let go of his grief about Liza, which I had inadvertently helped with by discovering the truth behind her murder. In Alaska, we finally connected, finding ourselves only with each other and Niko on a dangerous mission that led to so much more than we thought it would be. I didn't think we'd ever be the closest of the siblings, but I was grateful there was no more animosity there. I was willing to let it all go, all the comments and meanness, thanks to the smile he had as I finally saw him on the screen.

It was a good smile. A healthy smile. He had some darkness under his eyes, but we all knew he was working overtime trying to find information on the dark web and make sure there were no weaknesses in our security, at least not on the digital front.

There's something about nearly dying with a person that changes a relationship. I never thought Davor would ever be happy to see each other, but here we are.

“How are you, Davor? You seem tired. Dirk was tired when he showed up today, as well. Were you working on things together last night?”

“Actually, yes,” Davor said, nodding. “Though, he should have gotten plenty of sleep. It was much later for me.”

“Huh...” I pursed my lips until Davor frowned, and I realized he thought I was upset with him. “Not you. He was looking particularly tired when he picked up Carey this morning. He’s taken her to the gun range today. He’s safe enough, and from what Heath said, Carey’s not a true beginner, so they’ll be fine.”

“What kept that young man up all night?” Zuri’s concern was evident, but that was unsurprising. While only Niko and I had a strong relationship with Dirk, the young werewolf was still her nephew just as much as mine.

I looked away, knowing I had to either answer now or not answer at all. Niko was nearly at my house, deciding to do this meeting from my office instead of his own. It only made sense because my house was much more secure than his because I had a territory and a werewolf pack protecting it.

“I can’t say. I have an idea or two, but it’s really not our business.” I tried to be cautious. If I made this a thing, then they would keep asking about it until Niko arrived, and then I would need to tell Niko everything. If Landon thought I had meddled yesterday, I was worried I would destroy whatever friendship I had with him by involving my entire family.

“Boy trouble,” she said confidently, her age and experience able to guess correctly without me needing to say anything more, which I stupidly didn’t consider when I had started this topic of conversation.

“We’ll handle Landon, too, if he needs?—”

“No,” I growled as I glared at the screen to see Jabari’s shit-eating grin. “Jabari, we will not get involved with all of that. We have a lot of things going on right now.”

“War brings a lot of changes to relationships,” he said, leaning back in his seat. His grin fading, his mouth flattened into a serious expression, and he suddenly had the air of old wisdom, not a teasing older brother or uncle. “People change. While I know you’ve had a lot of drama and danger over there, this is different. People will move differently. That’s going to cause friction in any relationship, even the strongest.

“We need everyone to be mentally healthy, not just physically healthy. If someone is not sleeping soundly because they are having problems at home, that directly impacts their abilities when they’re needed by the rest of us. Keep an eye on whatever is going on with him, please. It does matter. He’s a part of this family, and this could get him or Landon hurt if they aren’t able to settle whatever is going on.”

“Okay...” I certainly wasn’t going to argue with the one everyone called the General. I took a deep breath. “Niko is nearly here. Before any of you ask, he was here when some of the... friction came to light. Also, he’s going to start training me tomorrow.”

“Oh, good. Someone will finally make sure you actually know how to fight. It’s about time,” Jabari said, a teasing tone to the words that covered the real feelings I knew Jabari had about my abilities. He was the best of the family aside from potentially Hisao. They fought differently, so it was hard for me to really pick between the two in their human forms. Hisao would win if he got the jump on Jabari, but Jabari was physically the strongest of my siblings and an expert in every weapon he picked up. Hisao would be on the losing end no matter what if they fought as werecats.

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” I said, shaking my head in a fake annoyance for him as I felt Niko park his car outside my house. “Subira will be on soon, yeah?”

“With Father,” Zuri said, nodding. “She might come on first, or they might want to let Father get his piece out of the way first, and she can relay what we speak about after.”

I only nodded, knowing this care was being taken because of me. Hasan and I split this family in half at the worst time. Mischa and Hisao still weren’t on, but I was reluctant to ask about that, feeling they would show up when he was on and not a moment sooner.

“Good morning!” Niko’s greeting was all too enthusiastic and bright for the moment as he strolled into my office. “Everyone is already here? Good, we can get started fast.”

“We’re missing Mischa, Hisao, and our parents,” I said quickly.

As if on cue, Subira came in, then Hasan.

“Hello, everyone. You all look ready for this,” Subira said. She smiled, seeing us on her own screen. It was somewhat funny to see her now with her own setup, not needing to stand or sit with either of the twins to get on the call. It wasn’t the first time, but it still gave the feeling of a grandparent learning to work a video call for the first time. I wondered for only a second if Davor had to teach her multiple times about how to check her email or how to compose one and add an attachment.

“We’re missing?—”

“Mischa and Hisao, yes, I know.” Subira cut off Zuri. “Hasan will be on any moment and told me that will be addressed immediately.”

“Is something wrong?” I asked, frowning, at the same time as all of my other siblings asked similar, our voices becoming more like a classroom full of children and less

like a group of adults.

“I don’t know,” she answered for all of us. “Hasan said he knew they wouldn’t make it and would explain it to all of us here. He’s been... busy.” She looked to the side, seeing something we couldn’t. “The Tribunal deals with more than just us, and something is happening.”

“How is the new workspace?” Zuri asked. “His office is only across the hall from yours now. How does that feel?”

“Do not meddle with your father and me,” Subira said, turning back to look at the camera, any sign that she was still awkward with the camera and screen set up gone.

Hasan suddenly joined, frowning as Zuri sank in her seat, almost comically. Subira stared her down, which felt like she was staring all of us down. I took a step back from the monitor while Jabari looked away.

“I was not meddling, Mother,” Zuri said, trying to smile.

“Don’t lie to me. Now, Hasan, there you are. You have important news about Mischa and Hisao. They’ve missed several family meetings at this point. Where are they?”

“Quarantine,” Hasan said immediately.

That changed the energy of my office as Niko and I glanced at each other, our confusion and worry about that answer a perfect match.

“Please explain,” Subira said, her lips thinning in a line.

“The Tribunal is dealing with a situation that requires a quarantine. I can’t say much other than it’s seemingly unrelated to the witch issues we’ve been facing. Hisao and

Mischa aren't involved in anything that will risk their lives or bring them harm. They are safe and in a secure location, recovering from exposure to something we are still investigating." He lifted a hand, and I guess most of us must have opened our mouths to ask questions the moment he gave us a chance. "No, no one here can visit them, not even me. Right now, the immortal who runs the Mygi hospital is there organizing and leading the situation so that it doesn't become something worse. He's doing this as a favor to the Tribunal so long as we make sure there's no panic outside of the quarantined area. Mischa and Hisao will be allowed to leave in a month, once they've been cleared."

"A situation of wrong place, wrong time?" Subira was the first to speak.

"Yes, love. I have spoken to them over calls. I can put in a request for you to speak to them the next time I get a chance, but understand that the Tribunal will not allow you to engage with this. I won't let you get involved with this. We have experts working on it."

I was curious about why Hasan felt like he could draw that hard line with Subira. He was in the proverbial doghouse, forced to leave his island and now living in the unfinished underground home Subira was having built to keep him. The last update I heard was that some of the main areas were finished, like the kitchen, as well as their room, but the other wing, with rooms for the entire family, wasn't.

"Can you hold that line?" Subira's question was a challenge and a dare.

"I have to. I can't risk anyone else getting sick and spreading it." Hasan met that challenge, and I saw his eyes flash gold as he realized he had given away more than he planned. With a stressed look and a quick rub to his temples, he continued. "Subira, don't make this difficult for me. Two of our children are recovering from an unknown illness that I shouldn't be mentioning here, and the rest are preparing to hunt down witches. I can't be fighting with you right now. We have an immortal and

a nephilim dealing with it, both of whom are immune while the rest of us are not. You cannot visit Mischa and Hisao. Once they are fully recovered and cleared to leave, they will be escorted out by those uninfected and allowed to go about their way.”

“There’s nothing we can do to help them?” Zuri asked.

“It’s magic in origin and attacks magic,” Hasan said, shaking his head. “The Tribunal is trusting the immortal and the nephilim. The immortal is immune for obvious reasons. The nephilim is a masterful healer and is immune for whatever reason we can’t determine. If anyone here goes there, you will catch it, and those two are already working as hard as they can to keep it contained. Luckily, Mischa and Hisao weren’t hit as hard, but once they got sick, they decided to stop moving, realizing something was wrong.”

“Well, of course, we don’t get sick,” Subira said, her nostrils flaring. “Let me guess, neither took a phone or laptop while they were running around so Mischa could throw her tantrum in peace.”

“Yes.” Hasan’s short answer made his annoyance with that part as clear as Subira’s.

“If they are being taken care of, that’s fine. They’ll report to me when they are both fully recovered. You will get them here, Hasan. Understand?”

“Perfectly. I was planning on dragging their asses here to talk about it myself.”

“Good.” Subira purred the word, her eyes glittering in a way that made me grateful I wasn’t the one in trouble today. “Now, onto the real business of this meeting. Hasan, I take it you have the information we’ve needed from those damn witches.”

“I finally have the files, and I’ve already digitized them.” Hasan started clicking, and

I heard a notification sound from my phone, and Niko's vibrated. I quickly looked while everyone else seemed to be checking their own, Niko pulling his from his jacket beside me. I had an email from Hasan.

"There's a master email and individual files for convenience. The largest file is for Niko and Jacky..." Hasan trailed off for a moment, but no one said anything. I wasn't going to stop him from saying my name or explaining something. We weren't on real speaking terms, but I wasn't so petty to make him explain to someone else just for me to hear it secondhand. This was too important.

"Continue, Hasan," Subira said gently, giving him what he was clearly waiting on.

"It's all the witches with the potential skills, education, and innate abilities who could have helped with the creation of their... new trick." His distaste for the witches being able to hide the smell of magic was apparent and matched by the growls, grumbles, and hisses from the rest of us. "Some don't meet that criteria but may have had some connection to the family coven in your area that tried taking over the Dallas Pack. Since they started this, that was the best place to start. Since we're going to be looking further into this than the witches were willing to, I'm recommending that you reinterrogate every name on the list. Smell for the lies, dig into their employment and lives until we know everything."

"Dirk will need to help us," Niko said, already scrolling through his version of the email. "Davor has enough on his plate. Dirk has a lot of the same skills. He might need you to hack things sometimes, though, Davor, if you can offer that."

"Of course. He'll be a priority whenever I get a request."

"Thank you, but Niko, we don't have the same list," I pointed out, showing him my phone and the PDF I quickly downloaded from Hasan's email.

“Huh.”

“Niko, your list is a bit more expansive in area, and it leaves Texas,” Hasan continued, explaining the difference to us. “You’ll be using your contacts to look into other groups that might have had contact with the coven family in Texas, either temporary business arrangements, marriages, and the like. Find out if those people are even still around or if they’ve gone to ground. Find out if they purchased anything from the Texas coven. For both of you, investigating so close to the origin point of this, I caution that you take care. Any one of these witches could be violent, and they won’t be expecting you.

“The Tribunal has kept everything quiet, so these witches don’t know that you have their information or what the Tribunal has already investigated about them. A few of them are already known criminals.” Hasan paused but didn’t give enough time for anyone to interrupt, just taking a quick breath. “As for Dirk helping, I would recommend that you ask anyone you trust to help. If Davor has been teaching him, I’m certain he’ll be a fine addition to the situation there. Since both events have happened in the Americas, you need the support.”

“The werewolves are training outside right now to run protection in Jacky’s territory and fight if necessary,” Niko said, making my jaw drop as he exposed that to Hasan. For a horrifying second, I wondered what the fallout was going to be and hoped someone else in my family recovered faster than it seemed I would.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“We’ll be safe here if they try to lash out after we start this,” Niko continued, oozing confidence in the idea and not seeming to notice the surprise of nearly everyone on the call. I was certain they were surprised for the same reason I was. Not that Heath and the werewolves were going to help protect us, but rather that Niko would dare talk about it in front of Hasan. We weren’t sure how he was feeling since the Germany incident, but apparently, Niko was leaving that behind him. We could only hope Hasan was going to choose to do the same.

“Have you two spoken about this? Can you explain a bit more, Jacky?” Zuri asked instead of letting anyone else jump in, including Hasan.

“Y-Yeah. While a few of the werewolves are younger, and we’ll be keeping them away from the edges of my territory and off patrols, they’re also training in case someone attacks.” I was trying to recover from Niko’s outing that plan before I was ready or could mention it myself. I was now scrambling to explain. “Even if they can just defend themselves until Niko, myself, or any of the older werewolves can get there, it’s better than nothing. Older werewolves have been doing close patrols for some time, but we’ve extended the patrol to my boundary, so their noses can pick up anyone snooping around the outer edge.”

“Good, very good.” Subira seemed pleased, relaxing in her chair like this didn’t bother her at all, nor was she concerned about Hasan saying anything inappropriate. “I will require you, Jacky, to take at least one werewolf with you on your trips to see

these witches as well.”

“What?” I couldn’t stop the word popping out of my mouth, nor could I cover my new shock. The curveballs in this conversation were being thrown too fast for me.

“You’re the youngest, and you’ve twice engaged with witches and ruined their plans intentionally. Three times, if including the original coup that led you to meeting the Everson family.” Subira tilted her head to the side, but I couldn’t read her expression. “Witches can be petty and personal, to their own detriment. You will be a target. Not just an annoyance to the witches you’re investigating but to any witches who think you’ve gotten too involved over the years, intentionally or not.

“With you also being the youngest, you are the easiest of us for them to attack, whether their goal is to kill or capture you. Anyone smart enough to plan an effective attack against you will also be smart enough to know it would be a crippling blow against this family, which will impact our ability to work with the werewolves. We’ll all be left more vulnerable to future attacks or them being able to further whatever plans they may have that could overwhelm us in the future.”

“Take Dirk with you,” Niko suggested when she finished. “She’s thinking of the same thing you and Heath were when you explained how the werewolves working here to protect the territory was important. Take Dirk, and on the days you don’t have anywhere to go, you can train each other.”

I turned slowly to my brother, exhaling a breath that left my cheeks puffing up and nostrils flaring.

“I don’t need a babysitter,” I hissed softly, knowing the mic would pick it up, but the words were intentionally directed at Niko.

“Well, you would be babysitting him,” Niko countered, smiling. “I’ll be out of town,

so our training plans have gone out the window.”

“Training plans?” Hasan asked, finally breaking his silence, having ignored most of the talk about the werewolves entirely.

“I was going to train Jacky in weapons and hand-to-hand and train Dirk to fight more in his werewolf form since neither of them can join the pack for training. Landon would have to train Jacky since Heath doesn’t want to act that way toward her, and Landon won’t because if he hurt her, he’d upset his father. Landon won’t let Dirk join pack training because if anyone accidentally hurt Dirk, he’d kill them,” Niko explained to the group before turning to me again.

“But, Jacky, you fight extremely well as a werecat. It’s not a perfect translation, but you’ve seen the werewolves fight, too. I know he’s trained before in his werewolf form because Heath would require it in his first year, so he probably just needs experience and confidence. He’ll teach you more traditional weapons and hand-to-hand that I trained him in as he grew up. He’ll be rusty, but it’s just the basics. Basics are better than nothing.”

“Fine. When Dirk and I are driving around and interrogating witches, we’ll train each other,” I agreed, lifting my hands in defeat. “We’ll come back to this after the meeting. Dirk is with Carey at the gun range this morning.”

“Carey has good aim,” Jabari said, humming pleasantly. “That’s a good call.”

“It was theirs, not mine or Heath’s,” I said, dropping my hands to my side as I made a face. “She’s not old enough to legally carry, though.”

“Legally. We’ll figure out something to do about that,” Jabari said as he looked at something, fiddling with it on the side of his desk. “A spell to mask its presence, maybe something like the charm we get done on the cars, so we aren’t pulled over all

the time. She'll just need to not get arrested by your human police while she has it."

"I'll talk to her father about whether she needs to carry a live firearm, and then we can work on something," I said sternly. "Can we move on?"

"We should. There's a lot to get through," Zuri said, hitting a button, and I saw a muted symbol show up over Jabari. "Mother and I were looking into the potion that the witches made. It's not entirely a potion. It can be drunk for short-term use, but the masking effect wears off faster. We found out how they are really using it."

"It's a soak," Subira said, sighing. "You can put a piece of jewelry in it, so long as the material is able to soak in the liquid. That makes the object mask the magic cast by the wearer. When I was looking over the dead witches in Alaska, some were wearing leather bracelets, while others had leather cord necklaces. I could smell the potion on them. We made a few of our own. It can last up to a week between soaks, depending on the strength of the spell and how much magic it whips up for us to smell. Spells manipulate an energy that already exists since there is magic everywhere, all the time, in everything. We can smell it because the distribution of magic in the area has been altered and expended."

"It also doesn't stop magic from smelling at all. It makes us nose blind to it," Zuri continued where our mother stopped. "We Moon Cursed. That's why our blood is in the mix; it targets us and makes us miss it. This is important since other supernatural species can somewhat smell or feel magic when it's used in any sort of spell. Father, they don't have to get involved with our problems, but if you could take a handful of these to those supernaturals for testing, it would be appreciated."

"I'm sure they will be glad to find out if the witches got one over on them as well," Hasan said with a nod. "Based on your explanation, if their blood was used, would it be likely to definitely work on them?"

“I won’t ask them to do that sort of testing if they aren’t comfortable, but it would be good to know.”

“I’ll see what I can do without the witches discovering this research, then.” Hasan started scribbling, taking notes for the first time during the meeting. “Now, allow me to explain what the other emails are, so I can step out unless there’s something else I must know.”

No one had anything to say that would keep him, so I sat down and listened as Hasan explained what he wanted from Zuri, Jabari, and Davor. Zuri would continue to research with Subira about the use of the charm, as well learning all about the type of magic my brothers and I had discovered in Alaska, which Subira had already been familiar with. Ways to break the control or block it entirely, and things of that nature.

Jabari was going to be talking to the oldest werecat warriors left on the earth about forming a hunting party whenever they discovered a witch who was involved. Hisao would be joining that once he was feeling better. So would Mischa. Davor was scouring every dark website that had witches talking. He was breaking into emails and everything else to see if they could find any suspicious talk.

Only Niko and I were going directly to witches, and I didn’t have any problem with that. I had a problem with something else.

“With that, I will leave?—”

“What about the identity of the boy?” I asked before Hasan could excuse himself.

“I’ve been working on that myself,” Hasan answered, not looking at his camera. “But, if I find myself out of options, I will have a request for you... and the government you have to work with on occasion. A DNA test... but I want to exhaust all of my options.”

“What about the Mygi Pharmaceutical connections?” I said, hoping for anything. That boy deserved justice. Somewhere, there could be parents wondering where their little boy went and what happened to him.

“I’ve already been working on that, but since much of that information was destroyed, it will probably continue to be a dead end,” Davor said, his words sympathetic. “I’m sorry. I only find references, but the way they did it was well hidden away from Mygi entirely.”

“Callahan and Corissa have been looking into it for years and have been only finding dead ends,” Hasan said, shaking his head. “No reason to be sorry. I know we all want that boy to be given peace. I have never met a child werecat I didn’t know the origin of. I find it just as disturbing as everyone here. There’s one more option after a DNA test, but...”

“I would be unavailable for an entire month,” Subira said. “If nothing else works, I will do that spell. His body is secure, right?”

“I’ve had the fae keep it from deteriorating,” Hasan confirmed. “I went to Alvina for the right fae to do it, not Brion. It’s in the Tribunal in a secure location. Only I’m allowed to access it. They can only go in to refresh the spell with me and Alvina there.”

“An entire month, Mother?” Zuri was the one who dared ask.

“A blood memory spell that will leave me living the boy’s memories for a month,” Subira explained. “Easier to do with family, where I am blood-related, but a species relation is not much more difficult. I couldn’t do it to an unrelated fae, for example. It would be too difficult. I haven’t cast it in fifteen years, and before that, it had been hundreds. I don’t do it often, and generally, only for my own purposes.”

“I thought you always saw the past dancing on the water’s surface,” Zuri said, curious about our witch mother. It wasn’t often, as we all knew, that Subira talked about real spells and how much magic she could really do.

“I do see visions of the past on top of the water, sometimes even against my own will when I would prefer just to go fishing. I do this spell when I want to look deeper, need to look deeper, for either more understanding or more knowledge. My visions on the water decide themselves many times while this spell is targeted, expanding on my natural ability and helping me control it for a specific use. Took me years to develop. I would teach you, but you never showed an inclination for the sight that I have, so I’m always wary about how the spell will work for you.”

“Oh, it’s fine. Not the type of magic I would prefer to do.”

I understood Zuri. Spending an entire month living out someone else’s life or all of their memories sounded terrible.

“If that’s everything for today, I should go. Expect another email later. I have another meeting with Callahan and Corissa about what the werewolves have been doing. They’ve been active, but we haven’t been able to discuss progress while we’ve also been trying to get these files for everyone.”

“Be home before the sun comes up, please,” Subira said, to which Hasan actually smiled before he said goodbye and disconnected from the call.

“Anything else we want to talk about now that Father is gone?” Zuri asked.

“Not that I can think of,” I said.

Davor and Niko quickly agreed with my sentiment.

“Tell Heath to feel free to ask me for any advice. I’m not a werewolf, but I’ve fought enough of them to tell him anything effective I saw from packs,” Jabari said before he disconnected.

“I guess I’m doing that later,” I said. “Talk to you all later.” I disconnected from my end and looked at Niko.

“That was fun,” I said, giving him a strained smile.

“It was better for me to give him the news than anyone else afterward,” Niko said patiently, shrugging as my eyes narrowed on him. “Including Subira. I know we’re all adults, and we like to do our own things, but Hasan gets more pissed off when everyone knows something before he does. And look, there wasn’t anything for him to say about it. Subira thought it was a good idea and made a point of asking you to work with the werewolves here more than you even considered. Telling him at the same time as everyone else eased the blow.”

“You put a lot of faith into that idea of Hasan,” I said with a soft, frustrated growl. “And you took me off guard.”

“I said I would use my position here to smooth things over about this plan without other werecats. They didn’t even mention the reputation issue involved. That’s a good thing. Let me do this for you and Heath, so you two can handle other important things.” Niko paused, then nodded sharply. “I’m going to look over the list he sent me tonight. I’ll leave on Sunday once I decide the route I’m going to take. Do you mind if I take the plane in Dallas?”

“Go for it,” I said, shrugging. The plane didn’t matter to me, and he clearly wasn’t going to hear my complaints about how he blindsided me in front of the family.

“I’ll visit werecats I know along the route, using it as a chance to tell them about what

you and Heath are doing here, which might not surprise them, but they should know. Keep ahead of things. In those conversations, I can ask them to help look into witches near them to ease some of the work off Davor and Dirk.”

“Sounds like a good plan,” I said, letting Niko continue his hunting plan. That’s what it was. He was actively hunting witches who might be involved, and being able to recognize that was integral. It made me realize just how well Hasan actually knew all of us. I was looking into people close by who might represent a danger to me immediately or had before and got away. Niko was searching for rarer prey, witches across the continent who think they’re too far from me to be noticed. Zuri was getting to play with magic while Jabari was gathering what was essentially a special forces group to lead.

“I’ll see you tomorrow with my idea, and I’ll need someone to schedule those flights for me,” Niko said, heading to the door. He was halfway out of the office when he turned around, his eyes no longer human but werecat. “And next time, keep all Dirk and Landon gossip away from the rest of them.”

“Sorry. It was an accident, and I didn’t account for Zuri’s naturally meddling energy putting things together so easily.”

“A mistake we all make every so often,” Niko said, sighing. He didn’t move, though. He lingered in the doorway, drumming his fingers.

“Is there something you need to tell me?” I asked, crossing my arms as I studied him.

“Is he okay? I haven’t seen him this morning or heard from him. I... I noticed Landon wasn’t around.”

“Landon is Heath’s problem and still at home,” I answered. “Dirk was tired when he stopped by to pick up Carey earlier. Not too tired, but tired. We think they might have

argued.”

“Ah...” Niko nodded then he cursed softly. He leaned back on the door frame as a sardonic smile appeared on his face. “Allow me to give my apologies.”

“For what?”

“You have to tell Landon that Dirk is joining you to visit witches who may be active enemies of the Moon Cursed.” He slapped the doorframe and left, half running out of my house, leaving me with that troubling knowledge. It wasn’t until he was minutes away in his car that I dared open my mouth.

“Fuck.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

DIRK

Dirk silently supervised Carey as she showed her knowledge of how to maintain the small sidearm, taking it apart and cleaning it.

He was still awkward around her, and he wasn't sure how to fix that. Carey was a kid. Well, she wasn't as much of a kid anymore, but she was still absolutely a kid.

Except it's not her age that always made me feel weird around her. It's the fact that I don't like seeing my own childhood play out in front of me. Always changing how I had to do things so other people wouldn't think of me as my father's weakness...

"How was that?" she asked, showing the cleaned parts.

He did his inspection, making sure she had fully cleaned everything properly. It was effective, which made him wonder about some things he was going to ask her about when they were leaving.

"Good. Put it back together," he said, waving at it. People at the gun range were watching them and had been since it was officially open. They weren't doing a good job keeping to themselves. He moved slightly, pretending to get a better angle of how she was doing, and she was reassembling it rather quickly. The movement blocked another person staring, too curious for their own good.

“People staring again?” she asked.

“They never stopped,” he answered, keeping his voice as low as hers. “Don’t worry. I got you.”

“I know. You’re like Landon but less overbearing and controlling.”

Dirk winced at the words, and Carey noticed that, looking up with a frown as she put the correctly reassembled sidearm back into its case.

“He’s been an asshole, yeah?” Carey patted his shoulder. “It’s because he loves you.”

“He loves his father but isn’t an asshole to him,” Dirk muttered. He’d been intentionally ignoring the mate bond all morning, not wanting to deal with the man on the other end of it. There were feelings from it, but Dirk knew how to neatly push the mate bond away far enough that they didn’t color his own mood and became easier to ignore. It wasn’t always negative. It was almost never negative; it was mostly an issue about focusing on work when he needed to.

Carey laughed, shaking her head.

“Sure he is! He just doesn’t do it that much in front of the other werewolves. The only person he loved but was never an asshole to was Richard,” she said, patting Dirk’s arm. She picked up the case and pointed at the two others sitting at his feet. “I can carry one of those if we want to head out now.”

“I got them,” he said, reaching out. As they walked out, he took note of everyone who stared at them, particularly those who turned and whispered to others. He didn’t grow up with much of this energy outside the house unless he was in a known supernatural area, like a business that catered to vampires, which he had avoided being human. It was the one way Carey was a lot tougher than most people gave her credit for. He

knew she could see and hear them, but she held her chin up and walked out without so much as giving them a single glance.

“I hope y’all enjoyed today!” the owner called out, waving as Dirk put the cases in the back of his truck.

“Yeah, thanks for opening early for us,” Dirk said, smiling back at the human owner, Brock. He’d brought other werewolves here multiple times, and he was familiar with Brock. Brock probably would have hated Dirk if they had met after he’d been Changed, but Dirk had actually come here a few times before his Change, and the owner didn’t even notice. Dirk finally let him in on it, explaining how it happened without too many details. In the end, it was Brock who figured out werewolves weren’t so bad instead of losing the easy business he had thanks to the werewolves now around, including Dirk, the “weird German guy,” as he had once been called.

“Thank you, Brock!” Carey called out, waving as well before she jumped into his truck.

Once they were out of the gravel lot used for parking, Carey sighed heavily.

“I don’t know how my dad does it, keeping that energy for people all day, every day.”

“Really? It seems like it comes easy for you,” Dirk said, chuckling. “You are way less awkward than I ever was when someone knew who my father was.”

“More practice. Everyone knows who my dad is, human and supernatural alike. I grew up with Dad as a pack Alpha, his face on the news when he was asked to do PR statements for the werewolves and everything. Your dad is well known among the supernatural, but you get to hide around humans. I never had that. I could never hide.”

He sniffed and frowned.

She wasn't sad about that. He could have sworn she would be sad. She wasn't even angry. She was just tired.

"It doesn't make you angry that you've never had a normal life?"

"Sometimes, it can bother me. Remember that party when..." She threw a hand toward him, waving it up and down. "That happened?"

"I... am not likely to forget," he said, swallowing. He'd been chewed on by a werewolf and was fortunate to have survived the Change. He knew that. They all did.

"I was that night for a little while. I had finally brought friends over and was having a normal birthday party... as normal as I could ever have. A boy was asking me out. I got in trouble for trying to lie to my dad about it. They all stopped talking to me after that, and I thought about it for a long time." Carey shrugged. "It hurt me, but... it didn't take me long to realize that I would take you, Landon, my dad, and Jacky over other kids my age any day. I would rather talk to Makalo and learn things about places I've never been. Niko is really cool, too. Normal is... small. It feels smaller than my life, and I love how big my life is."

Dirk didn't know what to say. He only had one thought, and it wasn't for Carey to hear.

I guess this is what growing up human in the supernatural world looks like if everyone in your life makes a full effort.

"You don't mind how dangerous it is?" he asked softly, searching her face while stopped at a red light.

“Everyone’s lives are dangerous,” she replied, shrugging. “Is mine more dangerous? Yeah, but... it’s not the most dangerous, either. There are people out there who deal with worse and have fewer people looking out for them. Plus, my parents don’t really ask for all of this. My dad didn’t decide to be a werewolf. Landon didn’t choose to be one, either. Same for Jacky being a werecat. Sure, they’ve attracted a lot of attention, but they are always fighting for things they believe in, for each other, and for me. If other people have a problem with my family, that’s their problem, not my family’s.” She stopped with a strong nod, then looked at him. “Dirk, it turned green.”

With a chuckle, he hit the gas.

“It’s your family, too,” she added once they were through the empty intersection.

“Yeah, it is,” he agreed. “So, how do I deal with your brother?”

“Ask him to tell you how he really feels,” she said, crossing her arms. “Landon has this thing where he masks really big emotions with anger. He’s not good at them, especially when they make him feel... soft or something. He’d rather be angry. Angry is easy for him. I get why. I know how he had to grow up, even with Dad and Richard trying to protect him from everything. They’ve never shied away from the truth with me. Even when my brother looked like he was about to cry, he would get angry. He’d growl and stomp his feet and be angry. You need to know what he’s feeling underneath that, and you need to hear from him.”

“When did you get so damn smart?” he asked, wondering when she went from a twelve-year-old girl to the nearly adult woman sitting next to him. They were just celebrating her sixteenth birthday.

“I’ve always been smart. None of you appreciated my genius,” she countered. “Can we stop? I want something from the gas station. I’m feeling some candy. We can say it’s how you repaid me for such great advice about my brother.”

With a snort, Dirk shook his head and kept driving right past the first gas station. As she gasped at him, the second came into view, and he pulled in. He grabbed twenty dollars out of his wallet and handed it to her.

“Get me a drink,” he said as she took it slowly. “I’m not messing with you. I brought you out early. Get yourself a snack and get me a drink.”

“Thanks, Dirk!” She was out in a second, running inside without him. He kept an eye on the door, making sure no one followed her in, looking suspicious.

When she got back, she handed him his favorite flavored water. He knew he wasn’t getting any change back. She would stash it like she always did. Landon had started letting her do that when they took her somewhere without Heath, and Dirk was willing to let it happen to him, too. He was nearly positive that Heath and Jacky had no idea how much money Carey kept in her closet. Dirk knew where she hid it because he had to do the bug searches, but he never told her that.

“Thank you again, Dirk.” She grinned as she opened a bag of gummy bears and popped one in her mouth.

“I’m amazed they never notice you have a sugar rush whenever we bring you home.”

“I go right to my room and talk to Makalo or work on homework. So much homework. Or I listen to music. I know better than to get too noisy, though. Too noisy and the parents ask questions.” She put her feet on the dash, so he reached over and knocked them down.

“Don’t do that. If someone hits us, your legs will break.”

“See?” She ate another gummy bear. “Just like Landon.”

“He’s right about that!”

“I know. I was proving my point from earlier.”

“Why are we back on that point?”

“Because I had a thought while I was in the gas station. Maybe you guys will understand better when you realize you could very easily switch places in different circumstances. Like those movies where the mom and daughter switch bodies or something.” Carey shrugged again and ate another gummy bear.

Dirk narrowed his eyes on her and left it alone, deciding he was out of energy for Carey. He turned into the Kick Shot parking lot and went around the building and down the driveway. Heath was still training werewolves, but Landon wasn’t there.

“Wow, he really skipped the entire morning of training,” Carey said, as surprised as Dirk felt.

“He’s really never done that before, has he?”

“No...” Carey’s head shake flung blonde hair everywhere. “Oooh, Dad is going to be pissed when he sees Landon next. He hates when werewolves intentionally skip these sorts of things, and Landon is... Landon. It messes with the entire pack if Landon gets too much special treatment, so Dad is going to have to deal with him.”

“Has this ever happened before?” Dirk asked, frowning as he parked near the small security building where he did the most work.

“Not with Landon, but Richard tried a couple of things before... everything else that happened. Dad’s yelling could be heard from down the street. He sent me to hang out with Shamus and his kids, who were human at the time. He laid into Richard, and

Richard wasn't a high-ranking werewolf. Landon is Dad's second." Carey made a face. "Yikes. I'm going to go in and stay clear of that blast whenever it goes off."

"Yeah? That scary?" He had seen Heath rightfully pissed before, but Carey must have seen those moments, too, growing up with the man as her father. Whatever Heath was going to do to Landon for skipping training was worse?

"Let's just say there are some days I'm really glad I was born a human and not a werewolf. They aren't often, but they do happen," Carey said, shaking her head.

Dirk was left a bit scared and got out quickly, following her into Jacky's house. Heath lived there, too, but even Heath made it clear it was Jacky's home before anyone else's.

"Hey, you two! Welcome home," Jacky said as they entered the front door. "I was waiting on you two. Carey, I hate to ask this, but?—"

"We still need to put everything back in the gun safe," Dirk said quickly, realizing that by following Carey, he had made his only real mistake of the day. He tapped Carey's shoulder. "Come on. Don't make me do this by myself. You need to learn this just like how we checked them out earlier."

"All right." She gave an exaggerated groan, but it held no real attitude.

Dirk dragged her back out as Jacky laughed. He had seen the pile of papers on the dining room table with her and knew it was going to be work for him. He just knew it. Since Oliver had stepped neatly out of the supernatural side of things, he had picked up everything else. He wasn't just the head of security that Jacky really didn't need any more, thanks to a pack of werewolves. He was her assistant.

He knew she had literally no idea just how much he managed for her—from keeping

the grounds around her place cleaned up and clear to looking through her emails daily to make sure none of them were suspicious. He knew when all of her meetings were, one of the reasons he had decided to get Carey out of the house. He knew all her contacts for everyone in the BSA and had spoken to them himself to try to get them to stay away from her house.

It's a good job. She doesn't bother me all that much. Neither does Heath.

He and Carey put the three firearms back in the safe, signing off that they were secured again. When they got back to the house, Carey hugged Jacky and looked at the stack of papers.

"Not for me to know about, right?"

"You can know, but you can't be involved," Jacky said, gesturing to a seat. "This is work for me and Dirk, though."

"I knew it," he mumbled with a chuckle.

Jacky pushed the stack to him as he and Carey sat down. She leaned over and pointed at the front page.

"Direct from the Tribunal," she said with a grin, her wavy hair falling over her shoulder. "We can finally get to work and make sure the witches actually investigated these people well enough."

She was his aunt, and he truly believed that even though there wasn't a drop of blood shared between them, he wasn't blind. Jacky didn't look a day over the twenty-six years she had been the day she was Changed. She and Carey were beginning to look more like sisters than a young mom and her daughter or stepdaughter. Dirk agreed with Landon when he said it was a good thing that Jacky didn't know that she was

probably one of the most gorgeous women in the state of Texas. She looked great and the only reason someone would miss it was because she was so casual about everything.

Her wavy hair was always windblown and messy but not tangled, so it seemed like a choice and not her disregard for it. She didn't wear makeup, and she certainly didn't wear anything that was meant to make use of her natural curves. She existed in a pair of older jeans, always bootcut, and she was always wearing boots, with some obscure band t-shirt that was probably black and the same leather jacket she'd worn for years.

Dirk was amazed it didn't have bullet holes in it or burned spots.

It was easy for her, and she had no idea.

"So... we're going to fully redo their investigation," he guessed. "I work with Davor to research them, and you'll go talk to them?"

"Actually, Subira thinks we both need to go to visit these people. She said I should take a werewolf because Niko is going to be traveling for his assignment, looking outside of the local area where that family might have had friends. We're looking at locals... or close to locals. We've got Texas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, and such." Jacky sighed. "Sorry... Niko volunteered you to join me, and since he'll be out of town, we have to train each other instead of being trained by him."

Dirk felt an itch in his head, the mate bond flaring back to full power as he considered what Jacky was saying. He was going to be leaving the territory, talking to witches with her. He was supposed to be her backup, ordered by Subira, her mother and his grandmother.

Landon's frustration grew in his mind, not because he already knew but because Dirk knew he needed to face it.

“I will tell Landon,” Jacky said softly, touching his shoulder. “I will, or Heath can handle it, though he doesn’t know yet. They haven’t wrapped up for lunch yet, and without Landon, I certainly can’t interrupt today.”

“I should,” Dirk said, shaking his head at the idea of Jacky or Heath needing to deal with this for him. “I want to do this with you. Subira is right. Someone should go with you to these places. I might be the youngest werewolf in the pack in terms of how long I’ve been a werewolf, but I’m also your nephew. It’s my place to go with you. I’m a member of our family.” Those words sounded strange from his mouth, but since Jacky was important to his life that made reconnecting with his father, which made those words come easier. He wanted nothing to do with Hasan, but that was a small problem compared to what all the Moon Cursed were dealing with.

“And?”

“And I need to be able to tell my mate that he can’t keep holding me back,” Dirk said, standing up. “Let’s take all of this to your office and talk it over. We can make a route, who to start with and everything. We’ll group states and try to get them done all together on short trips out of state.”

“Just like your father sometimes,” Jacky said, chuckling. “Okay, let’s go.” She started collecting the stack and paused as she looked at Carey. Dirk felt terrible. Carey obviously wanted to be involved and knew that was about to end, and it was his fault this time. He just hated working at the dining table.

“Carey... I’m sorry, do you want to watch movies again tonight? I know we’ve all been busy...”

“Yeah, that works for me. Let me know when you want to start,” Carey said, smiling brightly. “Go get your work done. Find those witches and take them down.”

“Okay. We’ll get through dinner and do movies. With popcorn. I’ll leave the popcorn and movie choices up to you.”

Dirk was in Jacky’s office faster, holding the door open for her. She sat down, the smile disappearing.

“Are you sure?” Jacky asked, her eyes gold instead of her human hazel. He knew she had no idea they were like that. She almost never did.

“Yeah. You heard her. Let’s get to work. We’ll plan to leave on Monday... that gives me the weekend to talk with my mate and try not to make this a fight.”

CHAPTER NINE

It was a long weekend. Dirk and I worked on our route to get through the witches efficiently through Friday afternoon, taking a break for the evening so I could spend time with Carey and Heath, then we were back at it on Saturday. By Sunday, I was with Dirk again, this time to say goodbye to Niko, who was flying out in the afternoon. I wasn't going to need the plane. Dirk and I intended to drive the area instead, so I was letting Niko not only use it to leave but keep it for his entire travels.

"He'll be okay," Dirk said, elbowing me lightly. "Stop tearing up your nails. Niko is used to this sort of thing."

I looked down at my hands, seeing I had been picking at my nails. I shoved them into my pockets and sighed.

"Thanks. I know he's always been good at this sort of thing. It's just... Germany happened, then Alaska..."

"He was fine in Alaska, barely scratched," Dirk reminded me, chuckling. "But, yeah, Germany was a rough trip for everyone involved. He's gone, though. Rainer isn't going to pop up in Maryland or somewhere else to get Niko."

"Yeah..." After months, the ache of losing Fenris still twisted my heart.

Dirk made a face but didn't say anything. He reached out with one arm and gave me a

half hug, squeezing me into his side.

“Sorry. Didn’t mean to bring him up.”

“It’s okay. I’ve been haunted by a lot of things for a while now,” I said, shaking my head as I stepped away. “I’ll come back out when Niko gets close. This is Heath’s one day off, so I’m going to spend some time with him.”

“Okay. I’ll work on some admin in the security office.” Dirk jogged down the stairs and walked purposefully to the security building that had been built in my yard. It wasn’t small, but it wasn’t more than a few rooms. Someone would think it was a very big shed for lawn mowers and things like that or a workshop for home improvement and wood working if they didn’t know who owned this house.

It was an eyesore that I suffered through.

One day, I’m going to tear everything down and start over here, so it at least looks like it was intentional.

I went inside to find Heath working on his laptop and decided to start pushing it closed slowly, smiling as his stormy-blue eyes looked over the top. I kept pushing it down, revealing his bemused smile. He didn’t stop me as I closed it entirely.

“I hope that wasn’t important,” I said, leaning down to kiss him, my fingers still holding the laptop closed in case he tried to open it back up.

“Sunday work is never important. Do you want to do anything?”

“Well, Niko leaves this afternoon, so Dirk is over. He can stay here and keep an eye on Carey if she needs anything... Why don’t you and I go to brunch and get away from everything here?”

“I like that idea,” he said, smiling as I kissed him again. “Let me get shoes on.”

“I’ll be at your truck.”

“Oh, so I’m driving us on this date. Am I also paying?”

I shrugged, letting him decide as I walked backward to the door to go to the garage.

“It’ll be my treat,” he said, laughing as he went to get ready.

I went into the garage, another eyesore we added to my home that wasn’t part of the original plans. Heath, being in construction and development, made the changes fast, easy, and well done, something most people couldn’t afford or even had access to. That also meant that every change popped up so fast, I would get dizzy. While Heath’s teams did an amazing job of matching the additions to my home, it was still odd seeing my home with a split-level garage, a giant shed thing, and a proper, very nice driveway.

Five years ago, I was parking behind Kick Shot, walking down a small, worn trail to get home. The tree line was closer to my house, allowing me to feel like I was surrounded at all times. I had been alone in my territory, completely absorbed in the small world I had claimed as my own.

Five years ago, I hadn’t known Heath. The five-year anniversary of that was coming up. Five years since a werewolf-witch, a half-breed like my mother and the twins, tried to take over the Dallas werewolf pack.

If it weren’t for that, nothing else in the last five years would have happened, not in the same way, if at all.

Time just keeps flying by. It feels like I can’t keep up some days.

Today wasn't one of those days. Today, things felt slow and easy, even though I knew they weren't. It felt like the moment at the top of a rollercoaster, and I kept waiting for it to go over the peak and begin the drop, but it wouldn't. That feeling of sitting in the front row, seeing the fall before you, that second the coaster held you...

That was my Sunday.

Heath met me at his truck, and we went to brunch. It was a nice distraction, one I used to ask him about something other than witches and war.

"How's the pack house coming?" I asked, laughing as I saw his eyes light up.

"We'll be done by the end of the year. The basement floor is already finished and usable, just in case, and now we're working on the ground level and upper floor. I'm also bringing in the landscapers and outdoor crews for the amenities behind the building next month." He continued on, telling me how his plans were slightly different from the initial drawing, but nothing was major. Extra space was added to each floor, making some of the rooms bigger. It was little things.

I listened indulgently, knowing this was his passion project. It was necessary to have, but it didn't have to be everything he was making it. He enjoyed giving something back to his werewolves, and the pack house was the biggest gift he could give them. A place they can call home at any time. A place they could throw their birthday parties away from humans who found them scary or weird. A place they could get together and call their own.

Things they had lost when the Dallas pack finally fell to pieces, thanks to the witches. The mansion they had once used for those events, those spaces, was now mine by conquering rights. I had renovated it into a family home for when my siblings visited but didn't want to be in my territory with all the werewolves or at my house, which didn't have space for everyone. There were no more werewolves in Dallas, so it was

a good city for the werecat ruling family to have a place to live. The businesses and property of the pack all went to me and, in turn, to Heath, who was the original person who had collected or created everything.

While I couldn't give Heath everything I had been forced to take on from the Dallas pack's end, I made sure the businesses went back to him, merged into his own, and most of the accounts also went back to him for him to use on the Everson Pack, his rogue pack.

The pack house was a symbol of something important. While all the members of his pack were from the Dallas pack, they weren't the Dallas pack anymore. He was building them a new home for a new era.

I smiled and nodded, enjoying his excitement even if I didn't understand all the nuances and intricacies of construction, different techniques and build methods. I knew tile was tile, but he knew everything about what sort of tile he wanted and why it was important.

We got back right after twelve. Dirk was sitting on the front porch with Carey. As soon as I got out of the car, I listened in.

"Have you talked to him about leaving tomorrow?"

"No, but..." Dirk looked up and shut his mouth.

I narrowed my eyes on him. I had been hoping that was already taken care of. Heath didn't seem to hear, and I tried to quickly mask my expression when he looked between Dirk and me.

"Anything I should know about?"

“Hopefully not. You’re planning on forcing Landon to stay with you starting tomorrow, right?”

“I am. He’s been avoiding me, but that ends tomorrow.”

“You gave him the weekend to reckon with his choices and behavior?”

“Yes.”

I looked at Carey and Dirk, who were looking at bit like Heath was a time bomb, and they had no idea how to diffuse it.

“Okay, well...” I finally felt something I had been waiting for. “Niko is in my territory. He’ll be here soon. Heath, why don’t you take Carey to the movies? I’m sure she’ll enjoy it.”

“Yeah, that sounds fun.” Carey hopped up and was already heading for his truck. “Come on, Dad. It’s been a long time since we went to the movies.”

“And now I’m going on a date with my daughter... which I will also be paying for, correct?” Heath’s indulgent smile was at odds with his tone.

“Correct,” I said, kissing his cheek before I switched places with Carey. She waved at us while Heath got in, shaking his head as he came to terms with how I was going to force him to take a real day off.

Once they were gone, Dirk started to laugh.

“He’s... an Alpha werewolf, and you two just have him perfectly trained. How?”

“He’s not trained at all. I gave him permission to take time with his daughter,

something he hasn't allowed himself to do since my trip to Alaska and what unfolded from that," I answered. "He's normally good at making sure they spend father and daughter time together, but she's getting older and more independent, and we've all been busy. He was working when I found him inside earlier, so I dragged him out for a brunch date."

"Some alone time with you outside of the house and some alone time with Carey out of the house." Dirk smiled, and it came off as wistful to me. "That's nice of you to do for him."

"For them... and for me," I corrected. "It's important."

"It is," he agreed. "Niko comes over for dinner once a week, and I go to his place once a week without Landon."

"How has the weekend been?"

"Saturday is normally our date night... and it didn't happen this week," he explained, rubbing his head. His hair was growing out. He still kept it shorter, but it was no longer buzzed short. He had enough to style now or mess up like he was at that moment.

"What did you argue about on Thursday?"

"I was just trying to ask him why I couldn't train with my own father, and he was saying how nothing I do for the pack requires me to fight, so he didn't see why I should take the risk..." Dirk shrugged. "He's not... He means well, that much is clear. When we argued, I could smell his anger at the idea we'd have to fight about it. His frustration with why no one thinks he's right... and his fear that I'll get hurt." Dirk sighed. "I guess I thought with the mate bond, we'd never really fight, so it's thrown me off."

“Subira and Hasan have a mate bond. They have for thousands of years.”

Dirk turned to me fully when I didn't elaborate. I didn't have to. I watched Dirk really take that in. We'd both witnessed one literally explosive argument between them. I could imagine there had been a few in their time together.

“And everyone thinks those two are perfect,” he finally said with a scoff.

“Hm... They're the oldest mate-bonded couple of the moon cursed, as far as anyone knows... Callahan and Corissa are mate bonded, too, and they have disagreements.”

“I get what you're saying, Jacky.” Dirk lifted a hand to stop me as he looked down my driveway as we waited for Niko to tell us goodbye. I smiled and bumped my shoulder against his. He bumped me back, and I knew he would be fine.

Niko's stop by my house was fast, with hugs and well wishes before he had to rush to Dallas, already running late. Once he was gone, and before Heath and Carey could get back to save him, I turned on Dirk.

“You have to go home and talk to Landon about tomorrow. We'll be driving around Texas for most of the week. He needs to know now.” We were starting with the closest witches since they seemed the least suspicious. They would know why they were being questioned again by a werecat and werewolf, thanks to proximity, and wouldn't make much of a big deal about it. They had been told during the first round of questioning that others may come. Over a year ago now, but we were finally getting to do that second round of questioning.

“I'll head out now and hope it's done by dinner. It'll at least mean we won't be up all night talking about it... I hope.”

“You are required to get sleep tonight. You're driving tomorrow,” I said, pushing him

toward his truck. “You tell Landon that, and if he gives you lip, text me, and I’ll go over there and give him more trouble than he wants to deal with.”

“He’s stronger than you.”

“I’ve dealt with people stronger than me before,” I reminded my nephew.

I watched him leave, having successfully pushed him into his truck to do the one thing he asked me to leave to him. Once he was gone, I took a deep breath and enjoyed the one thing I rarely had much of anymore.

Actual alone time on my own property.

Carey is smart. She’ll convince Heath to take her to dinner in Tyler or something after the movie and give me the evening off... which means I get to eat whatever I want for dinner, and no one will judge me.

CHAPTER TEN

HEATH

Heath sat at dinner with his daughter, letting her pick whatever she wanted off the menu for both of them. They had gone to the movies, just like Jacky had recommended, and saw a double feature, then they drove around for a little while, trying to find somewhere to eat. They ended up at one of the nicer restaurants in Tyler. It wasn't the same caliber they could find in Dallas, but neither of them had wanted to drive all the way there.

"I think my dad will really like this one," she said, pointing at the menu for the server. He had no idea which item she was pointing at and didn't care. He would eat anything she picked out for him. It would make the meal special even if he didn't like the taste.

"Sir?" The server looked at him, batting her eyelashes in that flirtatious way that told him this young woman didn't know who he was, only seeing the attractive man with his daughter, who should seem too old to be his daughter now. With no wife or girlfriend in sight, she saw someone she could flirt with, maybe for a better tip or maybe for an exchange of numbers.

Perhaps we should have made the drive to Dallas. Any of the restaurants I used to frequent there would have made sure to tell their new staff not to try flirting with me when I wanted to enjoy my meal.

“My daughter knows what I like and don’t,” he said simply, shrugging a shoulder to make sure the server knew he truly didn’t care what his daughter was picking or how much it cost. “I’m sure whatever it is will be wonderful.”

“We also want this for dessert,” Carey continued, pointing at something else on the next page of the menu. “And this. We’ll split them both.”

“Oh, okay,” the server, whose name tag said Natalie, looked back down at what Carey was making him pay for and wrote both of those down. “Sir? Is there anything you would like to add?”

“My daughter’s choices will be fine,” Heath said softly, not missing how Carey rolled her eyes at Natalie, who he was certain introduced herself while he had been thinking of other things and missed it. “Before you go, I would like to ask about the status of our drinks. Another server took that order when we sat down.” He knew Carey wouldn’t ask to avoid any conflict with a random server, but he was parched.

“Of course, I’ll check on them.” Her beaming smile wasn’t what he had been going for. He had no problem with being nice to the staff. He always wanted to be.

I don’t want them to think I’m going to engage with the flirting...

“Let me take these menus, and I’ll be right back,” Natalie said, practically bouncing as she grabbed the menus and walked away.

“You okay, Dad?” Carey asked.

“I’m going to need you to do all the talking today,” he said, not giving her a full answer.

“Yeah, I was trying. You made eye contact with her and now look at what we have to

deal with.” Carey rolled her eyes again. “You probably weren’t even thinking when you asked about the drinks.”

“I wasn’t,” he admitted. “I’m thirsty, and I know you don’t enjoy the conflict.”

“Where did you get that idea?” Carey said, the scent of her confusion filling the air around him. “I broke a girl’s nose once.”

“Would you have asked about our drinks before the food arrived?” he countered.

“No...” Carey looked away.

“Exactly.” He smiled, knowing his daughter well enough to know the difference between punching a girl for insulting the family and asking about drinks. It was a small thing to ask about drinks, but it was a thing. With the way Natalie was already behaving and his sense of smell, he knew Carey was already annoyed. He had to mention twice that he was okay with whatever Carey was picking out. He was okay with someone getting that clarification once. Needing to deal with it twice was a message. Carey was sixteen now. She was old enough to make these choices and have some control. He was giving her the space to do that. Every time someone wanted to defer to him, they counteracted the lessons he was trying to let her learn.

When their drinks arrived, Natalie was carrying them. She also brought their appetizer shortly after that. Each time she showed up at the table, she was doing those things—tucking her hair back, smiling at him, ignoring his daughter.

“How are you enjoying your food?” she asked him, and he looked at Carey.

“My daughter chose well,” he finally said, as Carey remained silent, glaring at the young woman.

“When you’re done with the appetizer, please wave me down and I’ll clear it for you,” she said, smiling at him still, not glancing in Carey’s direction at all.

When she was gone, he realized he was in the middle of a war zone. Carey went from annoyed to pissed.

I guess now is the time for Carey to learn how to step up in this situation. Great. Just how I wanted to spend my Sunday night.

The rest of their food arrived, and once again, Natalie continued to pay more attention to him than Carey. She didn’t speak up once again, and he wondered if she ever would, but he wouldn’t call her out at the table where others could hear. They could talk in the truck about it. He kept his answers short, always giving Carey the credit for her choices about their meal.

“Is there anything else I can get you?” she asked him as dessert was placed in front of them. Standing toward his side of the table, she turned in a way that implied she forgot Carey was even at the table with him.

“No, we’re fine,” Carey said before he could open his mouth. “And when you bring the check, the person paying is over here. You can go get it now. We won’t be having anything else after dessert.”

It was a struggle, but Heath controlled his expression and kept his mouth shut, wanting to see how this played out.

“I’ll get that for you,” Natalie said quickly, walking away fast.

Carey sat silently and started eating her dessert, and Heath tried to eat his own. It was sweet enough to make him slightly ill after only a few bites, and he saw Carey push her own away, only half eaten. The rest of the food had been good, better than he

expected at the price point. The desserts were too much, not only for him but also for his human daughter, which was hard to do.

When the check came, Carey paid in cash, shoving in bills and handing it back before Natalie could walk away.

“Keep the change,” Carey said, beginning to stand up as Natalie nodded and walked away.

“When did you get that much cash?” he asked, unable to keep the question to himself until they could make it outside.

“I’ve been tutoring online to make some extra money and kill time while everyone was so busy this summer,” she explained, shrugging. Grabbing her purse, a small thing she started carrying when she started driving, she gestured for him to follow. “Let’s go.”

“Okay.” He got up and smiled as he walked out with his daughter. They drew some looks, just as they always did.

“She got a ten-dollar tip,” Carey said softly as they stepped outside and headed for his truck. “Which was only ten percent of the meal. Think that was a good enough message not to flirt with a girl’s dad if the girl is paying for dinner?”

“I think how you handled it at the end was message enough,” he said, pulling out his keys to unlock it. He opened the door for her and closed it once she was inside. He quickly checked the truck for any bugs of the electronic variety and once he felt satisfied, he got into the driver’s seat and looked at his daughter.

“I was hoping you would step in earlier.”

“Were you?” She looked horrified. “I was thinking that if she wanted to behave that way, I didn’t need to cause a fuss. I just wouldn’t tip her and would make sure she understood that when dinner was over.”

“So, I was trying to teach you a lesson about taking control of a situation, and you wanted to teach her a lesson.” With a chuckle, Heath turned on his truck. “I’m not sure why I thought I needed to teach you anything now.”

“Maybe it’s because we haven’t hung out recently. I go out to dinner with Landon and Dirk enough, though. I see them do it all the time. Better than causing a scene in the restaurant by potentially getting someone in trouble, Dirk says. Landon will grumble a bit, but that’s Landon.”

“Landon has grumbled about too much attention at places since he was a child,” Heath said, sighing. “It’s not his fault. The attention used to be for a different reason than just him being an attractive young man. He also hates being entirely ignored the way Natalie just did to you. Also, for a different reason.” Heath was a white man, and his son wasn’t. Raising Landon in the latter half of the 1800s hadn’t been easy on either of them. It hadn’t been an easy time to be a mixed family.

“Yeah, it’s understandable why he is the way he is.” Carey leaned back. “Dessert was bad. That was disappointing. It was just... all sugar.”

“I thought the same thing,” he said. “The rest was good. We’ll have to find out if they are willing to do large orders or catering for the pack. We can forgo dessert for those types of things.”

“I’ll look into it if you want to pay me for it.”

“I’m sure we can come to an agreement. What’s your tutoring rate?” he asked, thrilled that his daughter was going to bargain her time for an income. Heath was as

much a businessman as he was a werewolf and a father.

“I charge twenty dollars an hour and tutor ten hours a week, maximum. I charge twenty because high school students and their working families may not have the money for more,” she answered, smiling. “Working for the pack, I will charge fifty because the pack has more expendable income and is more important work. On top of that, my tutoring is a set schedule, but the pack notably needs more flexibility. I should be paid to account for that difference because it might interfere with other areas of my life.”

He was so impressed by her immediate argument about how much she should be paid and why, he knew he was going to agree with it. He was truthfully proud of her, even if her logic wasn't perfect. She had been so completely confident in her offer that he knew a few people who would have just given her what she wanted because it was ballsy and charming to see from a young woman her age.

“Done,” he said. “We'll shake on it once we get home. I'll even have a contract written up to give you tomorrow.”

“Pleasure doing business with you,” she said, grinning as he pulled out of the parking spot and started the drive home.

Once home, he and Carey shook hands in front of Jacky, who was utterly confused by the action. He could only imagine the scene that played out for her. Father and daughter laughing as they found her, got into position and shook without saying a word to her about it.

“What is happening?” she asked, looking between them.

“A business deal that you have now been a witness to. I will pay Carey fifty dollars an hour for any work she does for the pack. Specifically, finding out what restaurants

will cater large meals when I need to feed all of them.”

“That’s just to start,” Carey said, grinning as she left.

“She’s scamming you,” Jacky said softly once Carey was in her room.

“Oh, I know,” Heath said, chuckling. “It’s only going to be a few hours a week, though, and she’s working for the money. She wants to be self-sufficient. Why not encourage that sort of energy?”

“Fair enough.” Jacky shrugged, and he could see it was put to rest for her.

“I need Teagan to write up a contract,” he said, kissing her cheek as he pulled out his phone to send that text. Teagan was humored and promised to have a draft by the end of the next business day.

Later, when he and Jacky were in bed, his phone started going off.

“It’s nearly midnight,” Jacky said with a groan, curled under the blankets right where he wanted her, as he reached for his phone. He wasn’t moving fast until he saw the name.

“It’s Dirk,” he said, answering it. “What’s going on?”

“You ordered me to?—”

“I’ll be right there,” Heath said with a snarl in his words. He was jumping out of bed before he even hung up, looking for a pair of pants. He grabbed a pair of sweats and looked at Jacky as he pulled them.

She was out of bed, too, pulling on a shirt and shorts.

“I’ll go. You stay here. Expect Dirk to come over.”

“I can help,” she said, and he met those gold eyes, ready for a fight if a fight needed to happen.

“I can handle my werewolves,” he said, knowing she would face anything if she felt the need.

She nodded, grabbing a jacket.

“Then I’ll be here for him. I’ll make him something to eat.”

“Thank you.”

He finished getting dressed and ran out faster than her. He was grateful for the touch of magic on his truck to keep the late-night officers from noticing how much he was speeding this evening. He nearly bent his steering wheel as he jerked it to turn into his son’s driveway. By the time he was out of the truck and opening their front door, he was furious, and there was nothing else distracting him from it.

I raised Landon better than this. I know I did.

He found Dirk standing near the front door, a couple of packed bags at his feet. He was holding a little too still for Heath. Landon was on the floor, his head in his arms, his knees pulled up.

The image of them made Heath jerk to a stop.

“He didn’t mean to,” Dirk whispered. “He really didn’t. Your order made me call, but he didn’t mean to do it.”

“That’s for me to deal with,” Heath said, staring at his son. “You head over to see Jacky. Sleep on the couch, so you get some rest for your drive tomorrow.”

Landon made a noise, but it was soft and short.

“Don’t be too angry... We’ll get through this. He just needs to talk to you.” Dirk didn’t move, and Heath finally turned to him.

“Go,” he ordered gently, but with enough power that Dirk didn’t have an option. He grabbed his keys and his bags, walking out without another word. Once Heath knew he was gone, he looked back at Landon.

Landon wasn’t looking at him. Once, when Landon was younger, Heath had found him in the exact same position. He’d punched another boy for the first time. He admitted to Heath that day that he had wanted to kill the other young werewolf, and that had made him feel guilty, broken, and immoral. Heath had known what the pack had forced his son to become and desperately wished that he could have stopped it.

Most importantly, it had made Landon afraid.

His middle child never handled his fear well.

Heath remembered a lesson from his first wife and held it to his heart as he did with all his children. He didn’t always live up to the lesson, but there was something about Landon that always had him thinking about it. She had said it about Richard when he was a wild little boy, and Heath had gotten angry with something breaking, but it was always Landon who made him think about it.

Love him first. Before anything, he’s just your son. We can fix what he broke and teach him better, but you better always love our son.

He walked across the room, smelling his son's anger, his despair, and underneath both, his wild, uncontrolled fear. Only the fear that he couldn't address brought Landon down like this.

He sat beside his son in the hall, not reaching to touch him yet.

"I took Carey out today. Jacky roped me into it, and I needed it. I haven't spent enough time with either of you just as your father recently. We saw a couple of movies, then went to dinner. At dinner, the waitress was hitting on me, even though Carey was the one ordering everything. She ignored Carey most of the meal, and I kept waiting for Carey to step in and say something." Heath was grateful he had that experience today for a new reason. It was a good way to address the fear without pointing it out yet.

"She didn't. She waited until it was time to pay, which she did and did a small but wonderful little power move to prove the point that no one should be ignored at the table. She said she learned it when eating out with you and Dirk. Dirk would do it, I assume, because she said he would tell her there was no reason to cause a scene and ruin the entire meal. I should have known better than to expect her to cause a scene, but the waitress was annoying me with her light antics."

"You didn't have Jacky," Landon mumbled, his head still down, so it was muffled by his arms.

"I didn't, so I should have expected a waitress to get bold enough to try flirting with me. There's one in every restaurant, and sometimes, I get put in their sections. It happens."

"Why are you not talking about what I did?"

"Because I know why you did it, and I thought it would be good to tell you a story

about how Carey learned something from Dirk, who has his own strengths, education, and survival skills,” Heath explained, finally reaching out to put an arm around Landon.

“I know he does,” Landon said, his body beginning to shake. The words came out like they had from the young boy over a century ago, fighting back the tears brought on by being overwhelmed by fear. “I know.”

“Do you trust me?” Heath asked.

Landon nodded.

“Do you trust Jacky?”

Another nod.

“Do you trust Dirk?”

Landon’s nod became vigorous.

“Then we’re going to go to training in the morning, and you’re going to work hard to pay for the day you missed. Jacky and Dirk are going to go do what they promised their family they would do. By the end of the week, you’ll see it will all be okay.”

“He’s...”

“Important to you. I know,” Heath said, pulling his son in tighter.

“He’s the first and only,” Landon continued, leaning even closer, his head on Heath’s chest. “He’s the one person I’ve ever loved. I can’t lose him. I can’t let those witches get him. I can’t?—”

“And we’ll help you protect him, but you can’t do that by caging him. You can protect him better by working with him as his partner, and you know that, Landon,” Heath said, rubbing his son’s back. “You know that. Now, take a deep breath.”

Landon tried, and Heath continued to comfort him. The fear was wildly irrational in its power for someone like Heath. He’d faced this time and time again. He’d made the mistake of not being the best partner with Landon’s mother. He was adamant about not making the same mistake with Jacky, but then the fear didn’t paralyze him like it did Landon.

Landon had no experience with it, though. None at all. Heath felt idiotic for not really thinking about it sooner. Landon, who was ostracized and attacked for what he looked like, who he was attracted to, and what type of werewolf he had become, never had a real loving partner before. With Dirk’s transition to a werewolf, then what happened in Germany, Heath should have known that Landon would only grow more fearful of losing Dirk to something violent and tragic.

“I’ve got you,” Heath whispered to his son, holding him as he cried until he passed out from exhaustion, just like he had when Landon was so much younger.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I didn't ask Dirk about what happened. I could probably make a good guess based on his scent and expression, but I didn't ask.

"Good morning," was all I said as he rolled off the couch in the clothing he'd worn when he arrived in the middle of the night.

"Good morning," he said softly. I pushed the plate of eggs and bacon in front of him. I had gotten up and made it while he slept, knowing the smell would get him moving eventually. With only five hours of sleep, I wasn't feeling great, but I would survive the day if I got enough caffeine. Dirk looked terrible, which meant I would be driving.

I guess I'll need to start that second pot of coffee now.

I did that as Dirk ate, saying nothing. Carey said good morning to both of us, inhaled her food, and left for her first class of the day. When Heath finally arrived, nearly an hour later, he went straight to the young man and rubbed his head.

"He's better today. He'll be walloped today in training as a dummy for the others. He's also very sorry, but you can talk to him about that when you're ready to. He's going to leave you alone until you get back, so if you don't want to see him, you don't have to?—"

“Of course, I want to see him,” Dirk growled, interrupting Heath without a single regard for Heath’s position over him.

I was honestly proud, even though I shouldn’t have been. Heath looked at me for only a second, certainly catching the pride in my scent as I sipped coffee from my place by the counter.

“He’s getting ready for training in the security building. The pack is showing up soon, so if you want it to be private, go now.”

Dirk was already leaving the house by the time Heath was finished. He chuckled and looked at me once again.

“He and I haven’t talked,” I said over my mug. “He fell on the couch, and I left him there. Made breakfast and let him decide if he wanted to talk.”

“Landon’s afraid he’s going to die if anything happens and... I misjudged just how much that was going to affect him.” Heath’s happiness over Dirk running off to see Landon faded. “He’s never dealt with this before, and it’s been brewing, but I didn’t realize how quickly.”

“There’s nothing to do now except let them figure it out, huh?”

“Yeah. Please make sure Dirk talks about it at some point. It doesn’t have to be today, but before you two are back. I know there’s a lot for you to focus on, but...”

“I know. I’ll approach him about it at some point.” I wasn’t worried about doing that. I’d do anything for these boys, even though something was making me a little anxious about it.

I’m not using them to distract myself. He needs to talk about what happened, and

we'll be on the road together.

"When do you two drive out?"

"In an hour," I answered. "It's a good thing you and Landon arrived. We would have waited, but we would have left quickly if you hadn't gotten here."

"You can text or call me for anything, even that."

"I wasn't going to interrupt what you and Landon needed to do," I said, shaking my head. I put my coffee down and went to him, wrapping my arms around his waist. "And it seems he really needed his father."

"He needed someone to lean on and tell him it was going to be okay," Heath said, wrapping his arms around me in return.

"And he'll listen to you saying it before he'll listen to any of us." I kissed his cheek, smiling.

We stayed there for a minute, leaning into each other's embrace, enjoying the quiet until Heath stepped away.

"It's not over. Landon will stay here with me and Carey all week on the couch. I need to keep an eye on his mental state. He's clearly not allowed to keep Dirk from leaving, and the separation will be good for them. I don't want him alone in their home. That will only remind him Dirk is missing when I'm not there to check on him."

"Is it that bad?" I knew it was bad but hadn't thought it would be that bad.

"He ordered Dirk not to move, that he couldn't leave, then collapsed in the hallway,

breaking down. He was stuck between the fear of Dirk leaving and hating himself for doing that. I talked to him and got him into bed. He woke up with a clearer head, and we spoke more over breakfast and coffee. I just want to keep an eye on him.”

“Damn. Okay. Carey will give him someone to focus on, too.”

“Exactly,” Heath said, small lines forming by his eyes as he smiled. “And Carey is also independent like Dirk...”

“Oh, good, and she’s willing to fight more with her older brother. I like this.” I chuckled. “And more fragile, being a human.”

“Oh, yes. Plus, I reminded him this morning that neither of us has spent much time with her like we used to because we’ve all been busy, and she deserves time with her brother, too...”

“Wow, going full guilt trip, huh?” I pulled away from him, shaking my head in mock disgust.

“It works.” Heath’s smile turned to a more mischievous smirk.

“Think they’re done talking?” I asked him, looking at the door. They were both still in the security building. I narrowed my eyes, thinking about the two men in that building. “They had better only be talking in there.”

“I’ll check,” Heath said quickly, clearing his throat. I followed behind him, and right on cue, both of them left the security building. Dirk was looking a little ruffled, and Landon was adjusting the collar of his shirt.

I stood on the porch with narrowed eyes as Dirk turned a little red, seeing me there. Landon sheepishly rubbed the back of his neck and put his head down when he and

Heath made eye contact.

“Hope you two had a good chat. Dirk, load up your truck with our stuff for the trip. We’ll take it over mine.”

“Okay.” Dirk jumped into action as Landon chuckled. Heath pointed to the training area they had set up for Landon to get over there instead of standing there like a fool, and it was right on time. Werewolves were already on the way, and Landon needed to seem like he was in trouble for missing Friday’s and Saturday’s mandatory training. Plus, if they were okay enough to make out in my security building, then Dirk and I were good to leave.

Once the truck was loaded, I kissed Heath goodbye, but Landon rejected a hug.

“I was an ass to you the other day,” Landon said, shaking his head. “I don’t?—”

I gave him a hug anyway, holding him until he relented.

“I’ve got him,” I promised the wolf.

He said nothing, but his scent was enough to know he understood and trusted me with Dirk. There was a lot of fear in his scent, too, but he wasn’t angry. He wasn’t about to put up a fight, and that’s all I needed.

“Drive safe,” he said, pulling away once it lasted too long for him to be comfortable.

“We will. I’m well caffeinated.”

With that, I hauled myself into Dirk’s truck. He shook Heath’s hand and hugged Landon, whispering something that I ignored by turning on the truck, before climbing into the passenger side.

“Thanks for driving today,” Dirk said as he put his seat belt on.

“Not a problem,” I said with a smile. With a few more waves, now to the other werewolves who were parking and getting out of their own cars, we were free to go.

It was a boring drive since I didn’t broach the Dirk and Landon situation immediately. The closest witches to us were all around Dallas-Fort Worth, so the beginning of the trip wasn’t going to be difficult. We could even take the first night of it at the Dallas mansion.

“Ready to shake down some witches?” Dirk asked as we reached the first stop three hours later, on the north side of the Dallas-Fort Worth area.

“Let’s do this.”

I went in first to a small accountant’s office. Everyone inside seemed very human, and it was incredibly mundane. I went to the receptionist and smiled.

“Hello. I need to see a Mister James Shipley. My name is Jacky Leon. He’ll want to see me.”

The receptionist frowned and looked at her schedule, and I knew she wouldn’t find my name on her schedule.

“You normally need an appointment to see Mr. Shipley, but since we’re not in tax season, let me see if he recognizes your name, and maybe we can schedule something for this morning.”

She got up and left. There were only a few people in the office, and I didn’t mind them because Dirk was doing that for me. There was a system for things like this. I couldn’t exactly flash a badge I didn’t have, and even if I did, it wouldn’t mean

anything to a random human woman. It would also bring bad news for this man's business. I saw no reason for that type of behavior when so far, James Shipley was an innocent man who happened to do magic.

The receptionist came back quickly.

"He'll see you now," she said, still frowning. She must have been told to hurry and send me back.

I followed her lead with Dirk trailing behind me, watchful in case anyone made a strange move. We were led into an office where a nervous man greeted us.

"Hello, Miss Leon. It's nice to see you again," he said, smiling falsely as he shook my hand. "Jessica, if you would close the door, please."

Jessica closed the door, and James relaxed only a fraction, looking at me with fear.

"Can I help you, Miss Leon?" he said, moving back to his desk and sitting down. "I thought the... the..."

I held up a hand, listening to the receptionist walk away. When she was certainly out of ear shot, I explained why I was there.

"Dirk and I are just confirming things that the Tribunal already talked to you about," I said, sitting down across from him. "An accountant, huh? It said in the file, but this still isn't what I expected."

"I only have human clients," he said, his nerves making me feel like a predator in front of a bunny rabbit. It would be so very easy for me to eat him.

"Really?" He hadn't been lying, but that surprised me even more than the tiny

operation he had.

“I was asked if I did any financial work for... them , and the answer is no, I don’t and never did work for that family. They didn’t come to me for anything, and I didn’t work in the same circles they moved in. I don’t work with any supernaturals. While I’m a trained witch, I’m very weak. I know some family recipes for incense and things in that vein, and I only use it to relax my clients because... well, money is stressful for most people. I live a quiet life and enjoy it that way. I do good business setting up retirement funds, helping pick the right investments, and things like that.”

“I see. So, you were a business that the Tribunal wanted to determine if they might have been able to follow the money. Well, if that’s all, we’ll get going.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s all,” I said as Dirk pointed at his own nose.

“We would have known if you were lying. Did you know others who worked with them?”

“No. I know people who had encountered them, but everyone knew they were... insular. They were one of those magic families who kept everything very close. The only time they interacted with anyone else was to look for the right wife or husband to keep their power up or for the right business contact to get them good money for what sort of things they could do. I didn’t know what they had been selling until the Tribunal appeared. Everything that happened in Dallas... I wasn’t looking to take on supernatural clients, and everyone around here knows that. I don’t even work with my friends. They never approached me, thankfully. I’m not... interested in that side of being a warlock.”

“Thank you for explaining more,” I said, getting up before I even had a chance to get

properly comfortable. He'd been completely honest. "The witches who encountered them... did you give those names to the Tribunal?"

"I did."

Dirk reached into his bag and pulled out the list. I asked for the names, and Dirk nodded when I looked at him, confirming they were already on our list.

"Thank you. Don't tell them we're coming. They get to be as surprised as you have been." When I reached out to shake his hand, he was still quivering as he took it. He gave me a firm shake, fighting how nervous he was.

"I won't," he promised.

Dirk and I walked out on our own, but James wasn't too far behind us. He told Jessica the rest of the day was going to be normal and that we weren't going to be clients. Family friends, he called us as we left, giving a simple cover story for our presence.

"Not all of them will be that easy," Dirk said, sighing. "He wasn't bad, though. Just a guy who might have had some connection and had to be talked to."

"Yeah, the report on him said the same, but you know we have to verify," I said, sighing. "I don't trust the Tribunal witches not to cover for someone when they get the chance."

"With what happened in Alaska? I don't blame you." Dirk shook his head sadly as we got back on the road.

The entire day was more of the same, and we ended at the Dallas mansion.

“I’ll take Niko’s room,” Dirk said.

“Nope. You’ll take your shared room with Landon,” I said, knowing one had been set up now. “You can find it on your own, but first, let’s talk.”

“About?”

“About Landon.” I went to sit down in the large kitchen at the bar, knowing he was going to fight this.

“It’s fine.”

“I promised Heath that we would talk while on this trip. He’s your Alpha and wants to make sure everything is okay. I’m your aunt, and I want to make sure everything is okay.”

“Then we’ll talk tomorrow,” he said, heading upstairs to avoid the conversation. I didn’t chase or attempt to call him back. I had all week to get this part done.

Instead, I looked over the list and made a note of the next few witches we’d be talking to. One name stuck out to me—trained in healing and potion work and worked with animals, based on the records. It was an interesting combination, considering what that family had been doing to the Dallas pack. The Tribunal had noted nothing of interest about the witch, saying she was uninvolved.

Olivia Kessler... I’ll see just how uninvolved she was.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Dirk and I were up early and driving out to see the intriguing witch. I wasn't going to say I was fully convinced the Tribunal was covering for her, but I must have given off a vibe that Dirk picked up on.

"You read the Kessler file, didn't you?" Dirk was driving this morning, having gotten a much better night's sleep at the mansion than he had on my couch.

"I did. I tried to read them all before the weekend was over, but reading them the night before seems better for my memory. Makes it fresh."

"Yeah. She's one they looked at because of her training. Also isolated from the world the same way the others were..."

"Yeah, it's suspicious,"

"Exactly. I've been waiting for this one since I read it on Saturday." Dirk was speeding, but we all drove over the limit every time we got the chance. Only Carey was required to keep her speed within the legal limit, and Heath refused to get her car charmed to help her break the law. She wasn't sturdy enough to survive the accidents.

We had to go nearly two hours out of the city, which wasn't an unusual length of time since normally getting to the Dallas area was a two-hour drive, but we were heading in a new direction. While we saw nearly a dozen potentially connected witches the

day before, today was getting the handful living out of the city on the way toward Austin.

The drive gave me time to think of the reality of my situation. There were hundreds of thousands of witches in the world, at the very least. Millions if you did a raw percentage of the human population. The idea that the coven outside of Dallas-Fort Worth was connected to just any witch was unlikely. The only thing working in favor of my searching was the fact the family had been so insular. They would have needed someone to help them connect with other witches in the world or show them how. They were smart, but their property hadn't shown us how they developed anything they did, either. They had destroyed or hidden all of that, and it was never found. It was only reasonable to think someone in the state had helped them. Even their family member in the BSA had been stationed in the state. Hisao had found that last member dead, thanks to the werecat who tried to frame Arlo, one of Heath's youngest werewolves, for murder.

It's a needle in a haystack search, but at least it's something. At least I'm doing something. Something is better than nothing. Doing this is going to show those witches we'll stop at nothing to find them and stop what they're doing to the moon cursed.

Dirk turned down a dirt road, and I was grateful we picked his truck for the trip, as the road wasn't great.

"We're nearly there..." Dirk rolled his window down since we were out in the country. He would pick up scents on the wind much easier. I followed suit because while my nose wasn't as good as a werewolf's, it was still pretty damn good.

It was a myriad of scents, growing thicker as we approached the main house on the property. Olivia Kessler lived on nearly three hundred acres, an amazing bit of land. It would be a great farm, but much of it seemed left to nature. The main home was

small, but the property was interesting because there were three other buildings and large sections of tall chain-link fences like you'd see in a zoo to keep the animals in.

"What have we found out here?" I asked softly.

"No idea, but it's something."

I couldn't help but snort at the comment that mimicked my thoughts on the drive.

We pulled up to the front, and I went to the door with the specific report for Olivia Kessler in one hand. Dirk kept watch down the stairs, the briefcase with all the reports inside so he could put it away when I handed it off. I knocked hard, which started a cacophony of sounds. Birds started squawking, dogs barked, and I was fairly certain I heard some coyotes begin to vocalize. The door didn't open, though.

"Hello?" I called out.

"Oh, hold on! I'm sorry! I'll be right there!" The feminine voice was frantic and surprised. It took another minute before I could hear someone walking to the front door, the soft steps barely audible under the music of the animals all around me. When the door swung open, a young woman with big doe eyes and long brown hair stared at me.

"I'm sorry! I was settling in some orphaned possum joeys that were found. I'm Olivia Kessler of the Magical Animal Rescue," she said, pushing her lengthy hair from her face, and I caught the scent of hand sanitizer. "Before you ask, the animals aren't magical. I just find rescuing them to be a magical thing to do."

"I see," I said softly, nodding. "I'm Jacky Leon, member of the werecat ruling family."

I watched her eyes go even wider.

“Hi...” she said, her energy changing into something more subdued. “Is there something I can do for the... werecat ruling family?”

“I’m following up on the Tribunal investigation. They spoke to you some time ago, and I’m just... going back around.” I held up the specific report with her name on it, only long enough for her to possibly see her name, then held it back for Dirk, who tucked it away quickly.

“I see,” she said, sighing heavily. “Still haven’t figured out how those witches did it, huh? I’m sorry to hear that you need to ask around again like this.”

“We had some developments recently. You seem well informed, even though you live way out here.”

“It was explained to me. I just figured if anyone could figure out what happened and how, it would be the Tribunal. That’s their job, isn’t it?” Olivia stepped back and held the door open. “Come in. Feel free to get comfortable. I won’t be foolish enough to offer a drink. You wouldn’t take it.”

“That’s very insightful.” I stepped in, and Dirk followed me, hovering closer to the door while I went toward the living room.

“Working with animals, I know wounded ones might not want to eat or drink if they don’t trust the person offering it,” she said, then sighed again. “Not that you are animals, obviously. This is what I get for not talking to people often enough. I don’t choose my words carefully. I grew up in a city with a werewolf pack, and I noticed when I was young that there’s something about the body language and...” She shook her head. “Neither here nor there.”

“Moon Cursed have some more instinctual or animalistic tendencies,” I said, shrugging. “You know how to read them.”

“Thank you for understanding.” She seemed immensely relieved that I got it.

“Do you know why you were on the Tribunal’s initial investigation target list?” I asked, looking around her living room for a moment, taking in the almost sterile way she kept it. Nothing that a puppy could eat and choke on; the vacuum was used regularly.

“Two reasons... my training and my land out here.” Olivia shrugged. “It’s what I get for not staying in touch with other witches. No one really knows what I’m doing until they get out here... and then, most witches think what I do is a complete waste of time.”

“What do you do?” I asked, looking back at her.

“I rescue animals. I rehab them and adopt them to good homes if they are a domestic variety, or I release them back to the wild if that’s where they were from.” Her smile was gentle and loving as she looked out the window. I walked closer, moving slowly to look out the same window and saw an enclosure where a bird of prey I couldn’t name was sitting on a tree that the enclosure must have been built around.

“That’s... that’s really lovely, actually,” I said softly, looking over my shoulder at Dirk. “I’ve rescued a few of my own wild animals if you ask anyone close to me. People think what I do can be a complete waste of time, too.”

Dirk started to shake as I looked over my shoulder at him.

“I think I heard about that,” Olivia said, her gentle smile becoming a grin. “A pack of wolves, right? You keep them in your territory and everything.”

“Yeah,” I said, nodding. I was glad to confirm a bit more of what she knew. “So, they were interested in the facilities and your education. Care to take us on a tour? We have to verify the initial investigation. Perhaps while you show us around, you can tell me about the education and training you got that made them look into you.”

“Oh, absolutely. Day-to-day stuff keeps me busy, but if you’re okay with watching me work while we talk, then let’s go.”

“Lead the way.” I looked at Dirk again, the poor young man shaking his head still at my inappropriate joke. “Dirk, you get to follow. Let’s go.”

“All right. Let me put this back in the truck.” Dirk left before us. I made no move, waiting for him to reappear, so Olivia was kept there as well. She didn’t seem bothered by the wait, though.

“Now we’re ready,” I said politely, now less intrigued thanks to the potential connection and more interested in just what she did.

“Great, we’ll start here, then!” With a smile, she waved for us to follow her into the kitchen. “This is where I prepare bottles for the babies. I use a few materials you would find interesting, curious, or suspicious, depending on what you’re looking for. Everything I feed the animals here, I also use my potion training and the correct herbs from my garden to enhance to help them gain weight or heal or grow, all depending on what they need. I don’t brew everything here in the kitchen since these sorts of potions can go wrong, but I keep portions of the ingredients here for an emergency supply.”

“Wait, so everything you do as a witch is for these animals?” I looked around, opening some cabinets she pointed to, seeing regular herbs I knew the names of and some things I had never thought of being used in potions. I wasn’t a witch, though. This was out of my knowledge base. Dirk came up behind me and took a couple of

pictures.

“I’ll send them to Zuri later if we have to,” he explained to me over my shoulder.

“To answer you, Miss Leon, yes. I was born with a small skill for plant related magic, helping them grow and such. I was educated in healing magic. I combined those to start the herb garden I needed for potion training from my mother. She wanted me to be a doctor. I wanted to be a veterinarian.”

“How did that go?”

“I haven’t spoken to her since I was twenty and told her I was going to vet school.” Olivia shrugged. “She cut me off. I took out student loans instead and never looked back. Got my degree and went to work with animals.”

“And how did you end up out here?” Dirk asked, frowning.

I knew he couldn’t smell any lies because I couldn’t either. She was being completely truthful.

“I realized that it was hard getting away with doing magic to save people’s animals while other people were watching. When I rescued a fawn near its mother, who had been killed by a car, I took all of my savings, bought this place, and started the rescue. My old coworkers supported me and helped me bring in donations, and if I need more complicated surgeries, I reach out to them for that help.”

“I have to ask... how do you pay for it?” I knew businesses were expensive, and you had to rely on them to make a profit if you didn’t have wealth. This was a non-profit animal rescue. She was only spending money.

“Donations help. I have feeds of some enclosures that are live and allow people to

watch and such; those bring in a constant small stream of money. I just make sure not to do anything in front of those enclosures. I'll point them out when we go near them. Beyond that, my mother cut me off, not my father, and they divorced when I was young. He passed while I was in vet school and left an inheritance..." Olivia looked at a small cage where those opossum joeys were bundled up and sleeping. I could smell them. "He loves animals, too. I fell in love with them when I spent my summers with him. With the proper investments and everything from him, I really only collect donations so other people can feel good about themselves when they donate."

"I'm sorry to hear about your father." I swallowed. It was upsetting to hear how she could lose her supportive father so young, yet mine, sometimes a complete asshole, was still kicking. It also made me jealous. Not because I wanted Hasan dead but because everything was so complicated between us.

"It happened ten years ago," she said, shaking her head. "Don't think too much about it." She started moving toward the back door. "Let's do the entire tour."

Dirk and I did the tour, including spaces she didn't let any inspectors into, protected so she could work on potions and spells to help the animals she took care of. While witches were out to humanity, they weren't well regulated. Some were known and open about it, while many were reasonably cautious. Olivia, it seemed, only told a couple of coworkers at her old vet office, and they agreed with her choice to come out onto her own property to work.

We met everything—coyotes and foxes, hawks, owls and pigeons, badgers and groundhogs. Even exotic things people had tried to keep as pets, like one tiger prowling in its large enclosure, which had a pool built in for it.

"Shakir is a lovely male, but no, I don't go in the enclosure with him the way I can with many of the other animals," she said as the tiger prowled closer. "I've been

asked if I can rescue more big cats and other large predators, but I only have a couple of enclosures right now for them, and once you get into a lot of big cat rescuing, you become a dedicated big cat rescue... That's a lot of work I'm not ready for right now. I like saving the local animals, too, and I would lose that or need to hire more people to help."

"I don't need any rescuing," I said lightly, smiling as the tiger bared its teeth at me and Dirk. "Promise."

"Thank you." Olivia chuckled. "As for my workers, if I haven't explained... I have a couple of ranch hands who come out and tend the land and feed animals with me in the mornings. You missed them today. Fully human, no magic. They think I develop supplements to give the animals, like nutrition smoothies." She reached forward, letting Shakir sniff her hand through the fence. He was pleased by this move, then walked away, leaving us alone. "This is also the end of the tour."

"Thank you for showing all of this to us," I said, meaning every word. I had expected a lot of things on this trip with Dirk, but what Olivia showed me was nothing like I had expected.

"Any time! I mean it. If the werewolves that you know want to visit, I'll welcome them. I have no reason to buy into any of the nonsense other supernaturals get up to, always bickering with each other." Olivia stared at Shakir as he went to soak in his pool. "We're all on the same earth. We should be helping each other."

I could only nod. Her sincerity was beautiful.

"I'll let you two get back to the house on your own and give you some time to look around alone; just don't go in the enclosures. Some of these animals are escape artists, and they are here to heal or to live out their lives." Olivia gave a tiny bow, something she clearly didn't do often enough, and walked away.

“Wow,” Dirk said. “I wasn’t expecting any of this.”

“Me neither…” I chuckled. “So, what happened between you and Landon?”

“Right now?” He was stunned by my audacity, but that only made it funnier to blindside him while in this beautiful piece of paradise on earth.

“Yeah, why not?” I smirked.

“He asked me to marry him when we get back. I said yes,” Dirk answered quickly. “We’re going to do it at the courthouse. He wants that piece of paper, and I want it, too. Something real and tangible. A real promise that we’ll do everything together from now on, and if we’re not together, then we’ll always think about each other. Wear the rings when we can and everything.”

When I was too stunned to reply, Dirk grinned.

“Was that a good enough explanation of how Landon and I are doing?” He started walking away, leaving me reeling from the sudden turnaround from the drama over the weekend.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The rest of the day was a blur for me, but it was fine. Dirk drove. He helped me get through questioning the others we had to visit and was able to pay attention to his nose for lies. I tried to look out for him as he took the lead.

“Are you going to be like this tomorrow, or will the shock wear off by then?” he asked when we got in the truck for the last time, knowing our hotel was the next stop.

“I will be fine by tomorrow.” The reality was that I was vibrating with the need to tell Heath, but with Dirk next to me all day, I couldn’t do that yet. They were planning on going to a courthouse and secretly getting married without telling anyone. I couldn’t believe it, but I could understand the reason. There was something about the ring that made things more. A real reminder. I was wearing my engagement ring most days, always able to look at it and think of Heath. When it wasn’t on my finger, it was on a chain to wear as a necklace. I understood it so well. It seemed a little fast, considering they had fought for several days, but if this was what they thought they needed to remember their promises to each other, then I would stand behind it.

But I can’t tell anyone while we’re sitting in the damn truck.

So, I waited. We got to the hotel late, and once we were checked in, Dirk said he was going to shower, then would figure out dinner for us. I was supposed to look over everyone we were meeting the next day, but instead, I called Heath.

“Yes, darling?” His warm voice washed over me, but it didn’t calm me today.

“Dirk and Landon are engaged and planning to get married at the courthouse,” I said, the words flying out of my mouth.

“Huh?”

“Dirk and Landon want to get married,” I repeated, hoping he was just having a hard time hearing me. He wasn’t. He didn’t suffer from a lick of hearing loss.

“Um...”

“Heath, Dirk said they are getting married at a courthouse! Landon asked him yesterday morning!” I said, trying to keep my voice down so Dirk couldn’t hear me in the other room.

“I, uh...” My fiancé was too stunned for words. That was the third time I had told him, and for the third time, he couldn’t form a full and proper sentence in response.

“Is this okay? Are they in the position to get married? I know mate bonds are permanent, but doesn’t this feel a little... rash?”

“Well...” Heath blew out air. “Weddings are more common in times of war and potential fighting... things like that...”

“Okay, so we let them go to a courthouse and do this. I mean, I don’t know if we should be stopping them. That’s why I’m saying something to you.”

“I think... I will be upset if my son gets married and I’m not there,” Heath continued, choosing his words with obvious care that made me think he was jumping some real mental hurdles to piece together his sentences. “So, I will talk to Landon about that.”

“Okay, see. I think Carey should be able to see her brother get married. And Niko! He and Dirk are just getting closer again, and Niko is out of the state. We need to get him back.”

“They clearly don’t see the need to plan an entire wedding...” Heath cleared his throat. “We’re not going to ask them to do that. I’ll talk to Landon, though, about making sure family gets to see them tie the knot. Just a few close members of our families.”

“Yeah...” I nodded, accepting that.

Oh my God, they’re getting married.

“Jacky, I know you’re telling Heath,” Dirk called through the connecting door. “Why are you like this?”

“You caught me off guard. Of course, I’m going to talk to my fiancé about how his son has gotten engaged without telling anyone,” I said back, now trying to be loud enough for Dirk to hear but not upset all the other patrons of the hotel. “You didn’t think you two were going to pull this off without at least inviting Niko or Carey or, God forbid, your Alpha, Landon’s father, did you?”

Heath choked on noise as I snapped at Dirk.

“We would have said something over this weekend,” Dirk said, groaning. “Please don’t make this a big deal.”

“If it’s a big deal to you and Landon, why can’t it be a big deal to us?” I demanded.

“Jacky, please settle down. This is a good thing. We need something happy to celebrate after so much has happened in recent months... in recent years, actually.”

Heath was finally over his own shock.

I smiled, knowing he was right.

“We do,” I agreed, smiling as I opened the door for Dirk to come in and bother me. “We’ll be back on Friday. You and Landon work on making sure we have a decent wedding for these guys.”

“I’ll do that. Thanks for letting me know. He’s inside gaming with Carey, and I’m about to ruin his week by making him host a respectable wedding for his future husband.”

Dirk clearly heard that, his eyes going wide as he scrambled for his phone. I grabbed it from him and wagged a finger.

“No, no. He gets to face his father without any sort of warning,” I said, making Heath laugh harder, catching on to what was happening on my side of things.

“This isn’t funny.” Dirk’s glare was very real, but it didn’t bother me at all.

“It’s hilarious.”

“Landon! Why didn’t you and Dirk tell anyone you planned on getting married?” Heath yelled at the top of his lungs. When he took my call, he’d been outside to get some fresh air and privacy away from his children. I laughed, knowing not only Landon was going to hear that. Dirk did, and I knew Carey inside the house would, too.

Carey’s excited and surprised shriek was the first response. Dirk leaned on the door frame, deeply horrified and embarrassed. I could only imagine what Landon’s face looked like.

“Who told you?”

“Doesn’t matter. You are going to throw a proper wedding for your husband,” Heath replied, and I could visualize the nonchalant shrug Heath had just given Landon.

“I need to convince Dirk that he doesn’t need to tell Jacky everything,” Landon said, groaning.

“We’ve got things here. It’s Tuesday evening... I can have something planned out nicely to have a wedding for them by Sunday. If Kick Shot can host the reception, we’ll be fine.”

“Call Oliver. He’ll make it happen,” I said, grinning at Dirk as I gave Heath the go-ahead. “Love you.”

“Love you, too. Stay safe out there.”

I hung up, keeping my shit-eating grin as I patted Dirk’s shoulder.

“How could you?” Dirk muttered, covering his face.

“Because we care about you and want to share these moments with you,” I said, rubbing his back. My grin faded as something else welled up in its place, a pain that I tried not to think about on most days. “And you deserve to have a wedding to celebrate your relationship with the love of your life, surrounded by people who fully support and love both of you.”

Dirk looked up from his hands.

“You’ll have one someday, too,” he whispered. “Thank you.”

I only nodded, glad he understood without me needing to say any more.

“Should we tell everyone else in the family?” Dirk straightened up, fixing his shirt.

“Only if you want. You have to call Niko, though.”

“I will. Right now. You can listen in. Or you can tell everyone else in the family. It’s fine if they don’t come. They are all really busy. Just you and Niko are fine from our side of things.”

“Yeah, I’ll tell them, though.” I smiled, pushing him back into his room but leaving the joining door open. I grabbed my laptop and a headset, calling whoever I could get. By the time I was done, I was going to make sure every single person in both families knew. I would even tell the entire pack if I had to.

For the first time in months, I was truly happy about something, and there was nothing throwing a shadow over it.

14

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

HASAN

Hasan wished he knew why Zuri ran into the house looking like she was going to scream, but he didn't have a chance to ask her. He wished he knew why she had scooped up Subira, and they disappeared into his mate's office. He wished his hearing was good enough to bypass the magic Subira had used to keep both of their offices private. He wished, for a small second, that Zuri wasn't his daughter, so he could find some excuse to steal his mate back, but he couldn't steal a mother from a daughter or vice versa. That would get him hurt. And in trouble.

So, Hasan went to his own office and pondered over things from his own meetings during the past weekend. He tried not to think about what his children weren't telling him or how they weren't including him.

I deserve it. First for thinking of them as just children. They're all grown adults.

It made him sad to know they were all adults. He liked when they had been babies and children. They were cuddlier when they were little. Now, they all could form full sentences, which led to arguments, and they had sharp claws and teeth to back up those arguments. He liked being a father, though. He'd enjoyed watching them grow up. For a long time, he had no problem with the end of the journey, seeing them branch out and have their own lives. With his eldest two, he'd been grateful to finally push them out of the den, but they had stayed with him and Subira for far longer than

the others after them would.

It must be an age thing. Or perhaps a phase I haven't encountered before. Maybe it will fade.

He tried not to think about how it was his fault that Zuri went straight for Subira and not to him with whatever exciting news she had come to share.

It is. It's entirely my fault.

He shuffled through the papers on his desk, read his emails, and made sure he got the daily update from Mischa and Hisao, so he could promise for another day that they were both okay. He was in trouble with the Tribunal for saying as much as he had in the family meeting, but none of them were punishing him for it. He gave enough to ease the minds of his family without them all jumping into action and joining Mischa and Hisao in a quarantine that none of them could do anything about. The immortal and nephilim had to resolve that, and the rest of the supernatural world had to trust that they could. He knew his middle children would come out of it okay. That was the most important part to him.

He stopped on his notes from the most recent meeting he'd had with Callahan and Corissa, sighing heavily, knowing he had to say something, eventually. He didn't know how to properly go about it, though. It was a dangerous line of discussion for him to have, even with his recent help from Subira. He couldn't see a therapist like a human fighting with grief and guilt could. His beautiful mate had done what she could for him, but even with that help, he couldn't approach this problem like he once would have tried.

He put it to the side, shaking his head as he found himself lost for a solution.

An hour later, Subira came into his office.

“Hasan,” she said, purring as she came close. Her lips were curled into a smile, one that warmed his heart better than any fire.

“Subira,” he replied, leaning back his chair, joyous to finally see her, all his pondering and pain forgotten just at the sight of her. “What has Zuri told you today that has you smiling like that?”

Subira sat on the edge of his desk, just out of his reach. He was greedy for her attention and touch whenever they were close to each other. Her choice of distance was a taunt to make him listen, and if he behaved, she would finish closing the distance.

“Our grandson is getting married,” she answered, the pure joy on her face such a magical thing.

He felt a wave of confusion, knowing his mate could smell everything.

“Makalo? He’s not even a grown man.”

With a small movement from one of her eyebrows, that confusion was crushed by something far more painful.

Shame.

“Dirk is getting married,” he said softly, nodding. He closed his eyes, sitting with that news and the shame he felt for not immediately understanding her.

My oldest living grandchild. Yes. Of course, he’s getting married. He’s mated to Landon Everson. They’re both young enough to want the official act of binding themselves together under the eyes of government and gods.

She wrapped her arms around his neck, putting her hands together on his chest, holding him from behind, but her touch wasn't able to banish his thoughts or feelings this time. It was normally a balm, always soothing, but he wanted his shame to eat him alive, so he was going to let it.

"Breathe," she whispered in his ear.

"I feel?—"

"I know what you're feeling. You didn't forget him. You were thinking of a different grandson. There are three. One is clearly not getting married any time soon, but Makalo wasn't a bad guess. He's young for it, but it's been done." She kissed his cheek. "Plus, I hear Makalo is good at charming young women, being the artist he is. It won't be long before one tries proposing to him. Just you wait."

Hasan couldn't help but chuckle.

"Love, you can't let that happen. Tell Jabari that he can't let that happen," Hasan said, knowing that women all through time fell for the artistic ones.

"Jabari knows," she said, laughing in his ear. "Aisha is the one doing the work, though."

"I'm not surprised. She knows how to cut a man down." He knew all too well. He hadn't wanted to hear what she wanted to say the day he met her, but looking back, he knew he deserved every bit of it.

One day, the world is going to figure out who really runs it, and they won't be ready for it. Women like Subira, Zuri, and Aisha.

May the gods have mercy on them.

“So, I’m not in trouble for not thinking it was Dirk as quickly as I should have?” he finally asked.

“Not at all. If you didn’t immediately hate yourself for it, I would have gone to tell Zuri and had a wonderful laugh about it with her and Aisha,” she said before nipping his ear. “But now that you aren’t angry at the world, you seem to keep finding ways to be angry with and hate yourself.”

“I don’t hate myself. I am... very aware of all of my mistakes right now.”

“And my mate’s ego can’t handle being too aware all the time like this,” she teased.

He couldn’t resist, smiling as he turned his head to see her perfect face. His powerful, loving, extraordinary mate who made him want to be better. Had always made him want to be better.

The guilt he felt from losing his way threatened to ruin the perfect moment with her.

“Your mate needed a reality check and a bruised ego for a little while,” he said, his words hoarse. He cleared his throat as he looked away. “Like everyone needs at some point in their life.”

“Agreed. Now, what have you been working on?”

“No more about this wedding?”

“Well, neither of us are invited. Dirk and Landon want a small wedding, and they will have one. We’re going to support from afar. Only Niko and Jacky will be going from our side of the family.”

“I see.” He could accept that. He also knew that even if Subira and everyone else

were invited, he would not be. He had no right in that space. He would miss this important moment for his family, and it pained him, but he accepted he was just going to have to live with that pain.

I was awful to those boys. I was awful to Niko and Jacky.

“Distract yourself,” Subira whispered.

“You could?—”

“Tell me what you were pondering on when I walked in,” she ordered, cutting off whatever idea he had to distract himself. With her hanging on him, he had ideas, and those ideas were always a pleasant distraction he was willing to take.

Instead, he remembered the problem that had consumed his thoughts as he tried not to think of other things. One of the many things he was constantly thinking about. One of the many pieces he had to juggle to keep some semblance of peace in the world and protect them from their enemies, known and unknown. For a moment, he felt overwhelmed, for there were a thousand problems he could tell his mate about. There were problems with the vampires. There were problems between the fae, the nagas, and the cambions. The witches were in a state of disarray because of the growing hostility between the species, mostly how the werecats and werewolves were cutting ties with them around the world.

Which made him think of the problem he had to carefully dance around with Callahan and Corissa, a problem they were dealing with, but he had to be informed.

“Callahan and Corissa... we had the meeting, as I said we would...”

“Yes, I’ve been waiting on an update to that.”

“They are having a hard time getting some packs to fully support their efforts, even though the threat from witches we’re facing is so unprecedented. Some packs are disregarding their command about cutting the business ties or helping to find missing werewolves. They’ve gotten packs that have quietly told them that they don’t respect the authority of the Tribunal or the Alphas who stand as their representatives.”

“Why?”

“I’m not allowed to say,” he answered hoarsely, truly hating the reality of the situation.

Her eyes went wide for only a second in realization but quickly turned sad. She wasn’t going to be able to say anything, either. They could meddle in a lot, but they could not meddle in this. There was an important line he and Subira couldn’t cross. By informing him of the issue, they had put a chokehold on him. They invited him into their private discussions about an issue that had started over a year ago, further back if they really wanted to reach for it. He couldn’t act on it. It wasn’t a werecat problem. Whatever Callahan and Corissa did to resolve their problems would just have to be the way things went.

“What can you say?” she asked after some time.

“I was grateful to them for opening up to talk about it. They didn’t have to.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

By the time Dirk and I got home on Friday evening, we were exhausted. Sixty witches across Texas. Some had skills that could have made them a good lead, some had businesses, some had facilities, and some had connections.

All of them were dead ends.

Grueling work that led to nothing, and that pissed me off, a terrible combination with the exhaustion. I was snappy once we arrived home.

“Jacky, do you want help unpacking?” Dirk asked, helping me get my bag from the back of the truck.

“No, I’m fine,” I hissed.

“I know you’re disappointed that we didn’t turn up any new information. This was just the first time out. We have a lot more names to get through. Then we’ll start looking into other witches if we have to. We’ll find?—”

“Dirk, I just want to report to Zuri and be left alone. I love you, but we’ve spent every minute of the last five days together, and I don’t feel like having this conversation.” It wasn’t the first time he’d attempted it. I wasn’t sure if it was the werecat part of me craving time in my own space or if I was just that pissed off by the fact that it felt like I wasted five days of my life for nothing.

Dirk left quickly.

“Well, at least he’ll have time this evening to make sure he’s happy with everything Landon and I did for the wedding,” Heath said, coming out the front door. He would have heard the entire exchange.

“That’s good,” I said, trying not to be snappy. There was a wedding on Sunday, but not even that made me feel better. I should have been stoked, but all I was thinking about was how I didn’t learn anything all week that could help anyone.

“I’m going to take Carey out to the movies, maybe even grab dinner,” Heath said, reaching for the front door again as I hauled my bag up the stairs. “Carey, meet me at my truck. We’re going to go eat out.”

“Okay, Dad! I’ll be there in five.”

“Thank you.”

I walked past him, knowing he was clearing the building for me to be in my piss poor mood without seeing anyone. I threw my bag by the laundry and went into my office, sitting down as I silently fumed.

I waited for Heath and Carey to leave before I attempted to call Zuri. I ended up getting Kushim.

“I’m looking for Zuri,” I said, rubbing my eyes as he yawned. It was late or early, depending on your perspective, in his part of the world.

“I’ll let her know you called, and she’ll get back to you. It could be a few hours, so if you want to get some sleep?—”

“I’ll be waiting,” I said. “Sorry, Kushim. Just let her know to call me when she gets the chance. I would prefer to get this conversation over before I go to sleep.”

With a quick okay, he hung up, and I was left to stew and wait.

And wait.

And keep waiting.

It was five hours before Zuri could call me back, nearly eleven at night for me. I was too tired to even consider what time it was in her time zone.

“Hello, little sister,” Zuri greeted, looking tired herself, but she was having late nights thanks to whatever magical experiments she and Subira were doing. “You have the report from the first week, I take it? You look a bit worse for wear.”

“I’m already tired, and that was just the first week. It was all for nothing. Is that what I’m forced to deal with? Following dead leads that someone else already figured out? It feels like a waste of time.”

“It was good to verify the investigation held by the witches wasn’t fraudulent. We can use that. We can look at different avenues, other witches who might not have seemed as important.” Zuri was writing something down. “I’m going to send this full report from you and Dirk to Davor. He’s been scouring emails, finances, and the rest. He’ll be able to take all these names off the list.”

“What about the Alaska leads? The witches were hired to kill that couple by other supernaturals.”

“We tried that already; the Tribunal werewolves took care of it. The other supernaturals in that area hired the witches to take care of the thieves but didn’t

specify a way to kill them. They had no idea the moon cursed were going to be used like that. Beyond that, they had minimal contact, and the person they were in contact with was identified... and found dead in Alaska. You killed her, based on the report.”

I groaned.

“When did we figure all that out?” I asked, rubbing my face.

“Father had his meeting with Callahan and Corissa, and this is what they could give him. Davor quickly verified it from what you three were able to copy before the Tribunal took all the materials from that cabin. It was easier for the Tribunal werewolves to deal with than our family. We’re not a large group. They can take care of more data at once. Luckily, we have two experienced witches and two more with enough power to be trained and help, so Mother and I did all of that research in exchange for their efforts.”

“And I’ve been left here, looking for a needle in a haystack,” I muttered. “I need to do more than what I did this week. I have to do more. This was miserable for Dirk and me. After what I did?—”

“Don’t, Jacky,” Zuri said softly. There was no power behind it, only sad sympathy, so I continued.

“I killed a boy?—”

“You killed a werecat in its Last Change,” she snapped, her sympathy having already evaporated. “Even saving him from the control of the witches wasn’t going to fix that. Whatever happened to him, wherever he came from? None of that could have been answered by him. He was never coming back. There was no saving him, Jacky. I need you to understand that.”

“I do?—”

“Do you? Because from where I’m standing, you are either willfully beating yourself up over someone you couldn’t save, or you are being willfully ignorant of the fact that you couldn’t. Not even the greatest witches among the moon cursed could have saved him. You certainly couldn’t. I won’t tell you not to grieve the boy. I am going to tell you to stop driving yourself into an early grave.”

I hung up on her.

She called me back immediately. A rush of fear from actually hanging up on her made me pick it back up.

“And you will not do that again. I am sacrificing precious time with my son to deal with all this, just like Jabari is sacrificing it with Makalo, and you are with Carey. Don’t you ever hang up on me again. We’re on the same side, Jacky.”

I winced and tried to become very small as she jumped into that rant the moment our video call was reconnected.

“Sorry,” I mumbled when she was done chewing me out.

“Apology accepted,” she growled. “Now, with Landon and Dirk getting married, they deserve a honeymoon. You let them take one at home for next week instead of going over to Louisiana. Push it back a week. Instead, we can discuss other ways for you to help. Niko is talking to werecats he knows. I know you’ve been in some contact with other werecats in your region. Reach out to them about any potentially suspicious witch activity.”

“I already asked them to let me know if they see anything. And to reach out if they know of any werecats missing.”

“Good. Follow up. Make sure they are still reachable just to verify they are safe.”

“I can do that.” It was the right thing to do. They were all adults and far older than me for the most part, but it was my responsibility to make sure they were okay.

“Thank you...” Zuri sighed. “Jacky... you’ve been a little off.”

“I’ll be fine,” I whispered. “It’s late. I really should go. I haven’t even told Heath a proper hello yet.”

“Go. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.” I let her end the call and closed my eyes, fighting against the dark feelings threatening to reclaim me today. A deep well of grief I couldn’t banish or move on from. It haunted me, and all I could do was slap on my best face and try to push forward.

Pushing away from the desk, my chair nearly rolled into the window. I tried to school my expression, keeping it neutral. Breathing in and out, pushing down the grief, I counted to ten. It was nights like this, with my mood already low, that I thought about the people I couldn’t save. I couldn’t go to bed thinking like this, so I fought it, thinking of everything I could do the next day if I just got some sleep.

Once I felt like I had it in control enough, I left my office to see the dark rooms of my home. Carey had already gone to bed; the soft music in her room was just background noise for her. Heath would be upstairs, either sleeping or waiting on me.

I went up, gently opening the door to find him in bed but not asleep. He was reading a book with only the small side table light giving a warm glow. His stormy-blue eyes met mine, and slowly, he put a bookmark in place and closed it. I slid inside and closed the door quietly as he put it down.

“Sorry for the attitude when I got home,” I said softly, feeling guilty.

“You’ve been on the road all week, talking to strangers and thinking about whether they might try to kill you if you turned your back on them. You’ve wanted to find some sort of resolution for things I can’t help you with. I got Carey out, so she didn’t see it. You needed the alone time. I don’t like seeing you like that, but I understand it. Let’s leave it at that.” Heath sighed before reaching out to pat the bed. “Come on.”

I stripped down to my underwear and crawled into the bed, putting my leg over one of his, my arm around his waist. He didn’t lie down and get comfortable with me, but that didn’t bother me. I wasn’t really ready to sleep yet.

“There’s a wedding on Sunday,” I said softly. “Dirk didn’t tell me anything because I focused back on the trip, knowing you and Landon could handle everything, but I saw him texting a lot through the week. Tell me about it, please?”

“Green and black are the wedding colors,” he said simply. “The boys will be in black, so will all the men in the wedding. Women will be in a deep forest green. I tried to convince them to wear white suits, but Landon didn’t feel white worked for him and Dirk. I took Carey, and we called Aisha to get advice on what dresses you two should wear. Same color but different cuts. There are only four people in the wedding after the grooms, so it’s not too many people to dress quickly.”

“Yeah?” That was good. I liked the sound of the colors.

“The ceremony will be right outside here, with the trees as a backdrop. Teagan, a werewolf of many talents and mysteries, can marry them. I didn’t ask for details. He just said he could do it.”

“It’s always Teagan,” I said, chuckling. “With weird information, knowing people, what to do...”

“It is.” Heath's voice was dry, but I could smell how funny he really thought it was. “Back to the plans. Carey and I will stand on Landon’s side. You and Niko, who arrived back this morning, will be on Dirk’s side. We’re the only ones who get to see the full ceremony.”

“That’s lovely,” I said, smiling into his side.

“The pack and the staff of Kick Shot will be preparing for the reception. The pack will be attending the reception, so they agreed to assist the staff in preparing so the employees didn’t have to come in too early. Oliver let it slip to them that two werewolves were getting married, and volunteers are allowed to work on Sunday. A few decided not to. The ones who did will be getting substantial bonuses. And tips. They’ll be well compensated.”

“Trust Oliver to make a small thing into a bigger thing he can take pictures of to promote the restaurant,” I said, now shaking my head awkwardly.

“We have a photographer; I forgot about that. She’ll be at the ceremony, taking pictures quietly and getting some pictures of all of us before we go to the reception.”

“Sounds like you have everything covered. That’s good because if it was me, it would be a disaster. I wouldn’t have been a single help at all, so it’s good I was out of town.”

“Hey, don’t say that.” He ran a hand through my hair. “You are incredibly capable, Jacky.”

“I haven’t felt like it in a long time,” I whispered, admitting to that painful truth. “I jump into situations and barely survive them. Or I don’t get what I need to help someone... or I kill the people I help.” I let go of him and rolled over.

He shifted down, wrapping his arms around my waist and kissing my bare shoulder gently.

“It’s been hard for a few months. I know that just as well as you do. There’s so much I wish I could help with, but I can’t. Being in my position, there’s nothing I do for certain things. You can’t beat yourself up, especially not for the things out of your control. Think about everything you’ve done. You saved Arlo from being framed for murder. You helped free the surviving werewolves of the Dallas pack, and they all have better lives now. You’ve done a lot to help people, Jacky.”

I couldn’t help Fenris. I couldn’t help the moon cursed in Alaska, like that poor boy. I’m no help right now.

That was what I wanted to say.

“Thank you.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Sunday came fast. Saturday was making sure those of us in the wedding ceremony were ready for it. Carey made sure we had the makeup to look presentable for the pictures. The men made sure their suits were ready, including Niko, who showed up in it to make sure the boys liked it on him. I tried on the gorgeous dress Carey, Heath, and Aisha had picked out for me. I didn't see the full effect of the look until Sunday morning when Carey was finally finished with my hair and makeup.

"Go look in the mirror and tell me what you think," Carey said, leaning back, seeming pleased with herself.

I'll need to thank Aisha. She has great taste. I feel like an impostor in it, but it is beautiful. I'm glad Heath and Carey asked her to help pick it out.

I sighed, happy at how good it looked on me, never having felt as beautiful in something so feminine. It wasn't that I never had been one to wear dresses. I had enjoyed them sometimes growing up. But they didn't work in my day to day the way Zuri or Mischa could do, handling business in whatever designer gown they decided to put on that morning.

"Thank you," I said, a little embarrassed by how I needed her help to get ready. "You know me. I don't... do this very often."

"You're going to look even better when you and Dad get married," she said brightly,

smiling from ear to ear. “I guess this is a sneak peek to that day.”

I flushed, my heart touched that she looked forward to that day as much as I did, even though there was no date set, no plans made, or even the whisper of such things being decided.

“Don’t get emotional on me right now. I can’t do my makeup and fix yours in time. Go hang out with Dad in the living room or something.” She pointed to my door, and I left her in the bedroom.

I saw Heath downstairs the moment I went out the door. He looked dashing. A suit was always a good fit for him, and today was no different.

“Where are the guys?” I asked as I approached him, but he didn’t seem to hear me. The smell around him was full of need, the kind of need that normally led back up the stairs and made him lock the door so no one could interrupt. His eyes went up and down me several times, and his stormy-blue eyes turned ice blue, lightening to their wolf color as excitement filled the air.

“Woah. We have a wedding to attend,” I reminded him.

“Your eyes look amazing with that color,” he said, the huskiness of his voice sending shivers down my spine.

“Are you looking at my eyes?” I asked teasingly. “It is a beautiful dress, though. Aisha did well.”

“I’m glad Aisha agreed with my choice,” he corrected with a smile that made me flush for a very different reason than Carey’s did.

“I... I didn’t know you picked it out,” I said softly, suddenly understanding some of

the choices that made the dress sexy. Like how the low back made me feel a little risqué without being too much. Or the way it couldn't be worn with a bra, thanks to that back. I had on pasties recommended by Aisha to help me feel more comfortable, and there were some clear sticky things helping hold certain parts of the dress in the right place. The front didn't plunge the way the back did. It seems rather tasteful from the front where it looped around the back of my neck.

His warm, calloused hand slowly touched my open lower back as he leaned in.

"How do you feel in it?" he asked, his lips brushing my ear.

"Gorgeous. Like a model," I answered, trying to sound casual.

"Good. I wanted you to know what I see every day."

"You have to stop, or we'll miss your son's wedding," I said, wondering if I was going to break out in a sweat just from standing next to him. "Maybe I should get some fresh air."

"We're not allowed outside yet. Teagan is making sure the ceremony spot is ready."

"I won't be in the way on my own porch," I said, feeling his hand move up and down my back, showing no sign of releasing me anytime soon. "You are something else right now."

"I'm nothing different than I was yesterday when I decided to follow you into the shower."

"You have to stop before Carey comes out," I said, putting my hand in his face. "This can't just be from the dress."

He chuckled and released me.

“It’s not. It’s the idea of a wedding and hoping for ours one day.”

“You and Carey have brought it up this morning. You better not be planning it behind my back.” I wagged a finger at him. He’d promised the engagement could be as long as I wanted it to be.

“Of course not. This wedding probably had both of us thinking about that day, whenever it comes.” He leaned over but didn’t kiss my lips or cheek; he went lower to my neck. When he came up, my face must have said everything because he laughed.

“I can’t ruin your makeup. She will kill me.”

“You never did answer me. Where are Landon and Dirk right now?”

“Dirk is getting ready at Niko’s house. Landon will be here in thirty minutes, so I can make sure he’s ready.” Heath took my hand, and I let him lead me to the kitchen. Inside, there was something I had never seen before—an old wooden crate with little bits of hay sticking out.

“What is this?”

“Something I wanted to show you before I took it to Kick Shot. I had to drive to Dallas yesterday to get it. Kept it properly stored there for decades.” He cracked open the crate, which wasn’t big. I owned bigger pots in the kitchen. He lifted out something that made me gasp.

“Richard gave this to me the day Landon was born,” he explained, running his thumb over the label. “I have one from him for Carey, too... Something to drink on the

happiest days of their lives.”

That nearly ruined my makeup as Heath put the bottle of bourbon on the counter. The fact that he had taken such good care of it was impressive.

“Is it drinkable?” I asked, not wanting to touch it.

“Even back then, we paid for the help of witches and fae to preserve things. It’s drinkable. The enchantment was refreshed yesterday before it left storage. They keep the entire storage unit enchanted, but everything gets enchanted, too, in case of emergency. It’ll be as it was the day it was bottled and Richard handed it to me as a gift.” He smiled, showing how it was still sealed, never tampered with. “I get to finally crack it open today.”

“Wow... Can I touch it?” I asked, my hand hovering on the counter next to it. He nodded, waving for me to look at as much as I wanted. I couldn’t stop myself from reading over the old label, seeing the year and knowing it was a piece of his history, his life—the year Landon was born.

“Richard had good taste, so I’m excited to finally try it.”

“Why did he do it?” I asked.

“When he was born, my father-in-law at the time gave his mother and me two bottles of wine for Richard. One to drink that day. One to toast with at his wedding. Richard knew about those bottles. When she passed, the unopened one was part of her things, and I made sure to protect it. It was right beside this one in storage. Carey’s is there as well.” Heath smiled, his eyes on the bottle of bourbon. There was a hint of melancholy to his scent, understandable considering the memories the bottle held for him. More importantly, there was a lot of joy, and that was what glowed in his eyes. “He picked bourbon for Landon and scotch for Carey. He knew I liked both far more

than a bottle of wine. I also didn't get Carey's on the day she was born. You know the story."

I did. Hard to be there for the birth of a new baby when no one told the father that he'd fathered a child. Carey's mother had hidden the pregnancy because Heath and she had already ended things before either could tell she was pregnant. He didn't know about Carey until she was left at his home.

"That's so wonderful," I whispered, putting the bottle back on the counter. "Trust it with Oliver. He's educated, and if he doesn't know how to handle it, his family is all involved in the food and drink industry with Davor."

"He and I already talked about how I was bringing a very old bottle of bourbon. He knows what to do with it. It will be fine." Heath picked it up. "I'm going to deliver it now. Can you let Landon in if he gets here before I'm back? I want to check on the reception prep as well."

"Yeah, I can do that." I watched him leave, smiling at the touching memories and history he'd just brought me into. For the first time in a little while, I thought about Richard, how he and I had met and how he had died. The tragedy of it.

Banish those thoughts, Jacky. Today is Landon's wedding. He won't want me sad about his brother today. It's not the right feeling for a wedding.

Landon arrived before Heath got back. He was already dressed and seemed too anxious to sit down as he stood in my kitchen, drinking the coffee I had decided to whip up. Carey still wasn't down, and I was almost grateful for that. The quiet was good, except for the way Landon kept looking at me.

"You probably think we're crazy," he finally said, putting down the empty mug in my sink.

“No, not crazy. Besides, we both know you don’t really care how I think.”

“I care a little,” he lied.

Since we could both smell the lie, I didn’t call it out.

I just stared at him.

“I care a lot about what you think of me, Jacky,” he said honestly. “Because I respect you. I really am sorry for how I was acting. It’s okay to think this wedding is an insane idea. We already have the mate bond. I should have talked to Pa and Dirk sooner about how I was feeling... I didn’t even think I was getting bad until Dirk had to call Pa, and at that point, I thought I had broken everything.”

“And instead, you’re getting married.” I crossed my arms.

“I was apologizing to him, and he promised he would always be with me and we’d get through things... I asked him to marry me.”

“Seems about right,” I said, chuckling. “Landon, it’s not crazy. You two are already in it for eternity. This is for here.” I poked his chest over his heart. “Right?”

“Yeah.” He nodded. “Where’s Pa?”

“He’s walking back from Kick Shot right now,” I answered. “I need to check on your sister. Her hair and makeup shouldn’t be taking this long.”

His laugh followed me upstairs, and I heard Heath asking about it as I went into my room to find Carey. She was nearly done, finishing the last curl she wanted for her blonde hair.

“You look great. Get down here and say hi to your brother.”

“Oh, I was wondering who drove up!” She unplugged the curling iron. “I didn’t even look at the time. I wanted to make sure I looked perfect today.”

I held the door open for her and watched as she stunned her male family members until Landon pointed and looked at Heath.

“This is why I’m glad she gave up on dating.”

“That’s... Stop that.” Heath waved Landon away before hugging her. “You look lovely.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

I hung to the side for a second, letting the Everson family look each other over, making sure they were all ready.

At noon, Niko and Dirk arrived. Teagan was right after them, then it was time to watch them get married.

Teagan waited at the small wedding arch that had been quickly put up just for this, looking like it was meant to be there from the beginning. The wedding arch was raw dark wood with ivy climbing around it. From the dark green to the raw nature of the arch, there was some wild and a little masculine about it, though it could have been my bias, knowing who the wedding was for.

“This makes sending Dirk here more worth it than I could have ever thought,” Niko whispered as we waited, offering his arm.

“Thank you for sending him,” I replied, smiling at my brother before I took his arm.

Across from us, Carey was holding Heath's arm, both looking for Landon and Dirk. Heath glanced my way for just a second, and I could only keep smiling before turning to wait on the grooms as well.

Then they walked out. Dirk and Landon came down together, neither wanting to be the one standing alone nor the one walking alone.

They stopped in front of Teagan, and I bit my lip, wondering what each of them would say.

They both chose traditional vows, but there was a mischievous note in how they said those vows that told me they had just said what they had really wanted to say after we left them inside. They had simple gold rings for each other, each shaking a little as they slid them on each other.

"You two know what to do," Teagan said, chuckling.

They kissed.

It was perfect.

I looked at Heath, saw him staring at me, and made a decision.

Come hell or high water, I was going to marry that man in one year.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

P ictures went quickly, Landon and Dirk demanding that we take a huge variety of them—all together, in different groups, even some solos. For two guys who had been so private about their relationship for a long time, I was touched by how they wanted every single memory they could get today, including with the rest of us.

“Okay, now you four go to the reception. We’ll do our couple pictures and do an entrance,” Landon said, waving us along. “Right, Pa?”

“Don’t worry, I’ll make sure they’re all at Kick Shot for you two to make the grand entrance,” Heath said, grabbing my hand. I waved at Dirk, who was laughing as Landon reached for him. I didn’t fight as Heath gently pulled me down the drive.

“I should have grabbed a different pair of shoes,” Carey said, groaning as she reached down to rub her ankle. “Heels in the grass aren’t easy.”

“You picked them out,” Heath reminded her.

She only groaned louder.

I knocked on the back door of Kick Shot, and Oliver swung the door open.

“Come in! How long do we have until the grooms arrive?”

“About thirty minutes. They are on the last leg of their photos, just the two of them,” Heath answered, letting me go in first as he spoke to Oliver.

“Perfect. We have everything ready. The rest of your werewolves are in the main room.”

I went that direction and gasped as I saw how they had changed the entire floor plan for today and decorated it to feel like it matched the wedding arch.

“Oh, this is wonderful,” I said, putting my hands over my mouth as I took it in. There was ivy on the wooden tables and chairs, and a large space was cleared for dancing. One table with only two seats was ready for the grooms and was the centerpiece with the most decorations. Another table with four seats had Heath’s bottle of bourbon. Heath grabbed my arm and led me to it.

“We have to be ready for them to come in,” he said, almost rushed. He made me take my seat, but he stayed on his feet. Carey found her spot at our table, and Niko joined us. I waved at Ranger and Shamus. Shamus was sitting with his kids, who weren’t kids anymore, but they were still his kids the way Landon would always be Heath’s. Ranger was moving around, but he claimed the last spot at that table, waving back.

“Thank you all for helping today,” I said to them, making sure to look around the room. Smiles were all I saw returned. Everyone in the pack was happy for Landon and Dirk today.

“Landon and Dirk have asked for no extra speeches. They’re going to come in, I’m going to say a few words, then it’s time to celebrate.” Heath pointed at the only other werecat in the room. “That includes you.”

“I’m not a public speaker,” Niko said, unbothered by the way he was told that he couldn’t speak up during the reception.

“Also, werewolves, no fights in the building. If you need to deal with something, take it outside. Better yet, don’t find any reason to fight.”

“Yes, Alpha,” they said in unison.

“Thank you. Now we wait. Oliver, you’re keeping watch?”

“I’ve got this,” Oliver called back, running to see the room and give a thumbs up to Heath.

It was another thirty minutes of light chatter before Oliver came in and made a gesture, to which Heath whistled. Carey and I had been talking about how to touch up my makeup when every conversation died; we went silent as well. Kick Shot’s back door opened, something everyone could hear.

“Welcome, Dirk and Landon,” Oliver said. “My wedding gift to you both is the reception. For being a good friend and roommate, Dirk. For being an amazing person, Landon.”

“Thank you, Oliver.” Dirk’s words were already choked.

When they came into view, everyone clapped and cheered, standing up to welcome the grooms to their reception. They found their table and stood at their chairs, both grinning from ear to ear, though the expression looked a touch strange on Landon. He wasn’t one to smile so much for so long in a single day.

It only made the day better.

“Thank you all for coming,” Landon said, the first to speak. “I never thought I would say this, but I’m glad to be a part of this pack. I’m glad you all came.” He lifted his glass, and everyone lifted theirs in turn.

Then Dirk picked up his glass and took a deep breath because he had to say a few words, too.

“Thank you all for accepting not only Landon and me as a couple but also who we are as individuals. It really goes without saying why that means a lot to both of us.”

With another moment of lifted glasses and a short round of cheers, the grooms took their seats.

Heath opened his bottle of bourbon and poured a glass, leaving everyone in silence for a minute, watching him treat it like it was ritual. He stood up once it was poured to his satisfaction, and I knew he could be a little particular about it.

“On the day you were born, Landon, Richard gave me this bottle of bourbon to drink on the happiest day of your life. Seeing you with Dirk, I know I picked the right day. This was all I ever wanted for you, to find love and acceptance and someone to go through life’s journey with, no matter how long or short that journey might be.”

I looked at Landon to see him needing to wipe his eyes.

“Dirk, you are a member of this family. You have been since the day you showed up on her doorstep.” Heath actually pointed at me, making me laugh and sink in my seat. Dirk covered his face a moment, trying not to laugh as well. Or cry. Who could tell anymore?

“Today only put it on paper. To the happy couple. May you have a lifetime, no matter how long, of love and joy together.” Heath lifted his glass and the cheers to his toast were the rowdiest yet. “Now, give us the first dance, and let us start having some fun.”

Landon and Dirk did just that, keeping it simple so they could stare into each other’s

eyes. Right as their moment ended, Heath grabbed me, and I was dragged onto the dance floor. We weren't the only pair that found themselves out on the floor. Roselyn and Piper danced, too. Landon and Dirk went around the room, hugging and shaking hands with people, getting drinks, and talking.

"This is such a perfect moment," I said, trying to watch them over Heath's shoulder.

"It only happened because you took a chance on some werewolves living in your territory, an unprecedented thing for a werecat to do."

"Don't make this somehow my touch or anything like that. This is because those two fell in love and decided to make a commitment to each other."

"Don't be so modest, Jacky," he whispered, kissing my cheek. "It falls flat in this dress."

"Thanks to your taste, it seems to be the only thing that falls flat in this dress."

Heath laughed like many who heard, but I caught Niko's spit take, which made Shamus cackle even harder than my comment, his laughter becoming a near howl as Niko had to clean himself and the table up.

Heath spun me, which brought some appropriately named wolf whistles and cat calls from the spectators. Heath grinned as he pulled me in close again and kissed me.

"Hey, I'm the newlywed. You two need to cool off!" Landon shouted, but there was no anger in the words, only warm affection and humor at his father and me.

When he was finally done spinning me around the room and kissing me in front of everyone, Heath guided me back to our table.

“You did a good job with this, Heath,” Niko said, having not moved since the reception started. He was sipping a beer, probably one of the German brands I liked to keep in stock.

“Thank you. I had a very short deadline. Luckily, neither boy is very flashy when it comes to these things.”

“It’s perfect,” I said, smiling as Dirk and Landon went back to the dance floor.

“It is,” Niko agreed. “What’s going on with those two? Aren’t they a couple?” He pointed, and I turned to see who he was talking about.

Jenny and Carlos were sitting at their table, enjoying the moment but not joining in.

“Carlos has a lot of... history.” Heath’s answer was soft. “It might take him a moment to feel brave or ready to join in. Jenny clearly wants to. She’s strong-willed enough to drag him out there, eventually.”

“I don’t blame him. Dancing is exhausting.”

“Carey, you promised both of us a dance,” Landon called out. “Get out here.”

“Fine!” Carey got up, making a face, and I realized those heels were really hurting her.

“Just take them off. The floors are clean, and Landon won’t let anyone step on your feet. He won’t want you out there giving yourself blisters.”

“Yeah...” Carey reached down to yank off the black heels, tossing them to the side of the room into a booth. She went out into the center to meet her brother, who looked at her feet, shrugged, and swooped her up for a dance, making her giggle wildly.

Eventually, Jenny and Carlos did join in. Carlos looked stiff and uncomfortable, but Jenny glowed. While Dirk and Carey danced, Niko and I relented and went for a dance because Heath pointed out something we hadn't thought about. Our family was going to want pictures of us having a good time. When Niko was done spinning me around, I found Heath talking to Ranger at that table. Carey was dancing with Kody, both laughing because they saw each other as cousins, and it was weird for them. Teagan got Benjamin and Arlo onto the floor as well, taking lessons from Piper and Roselyn as their partners.

"Really?" I said to Teagan, nodding at the situation he'd thrown those young men in.

"They have to learn eventually," Teagan said with a smile and a shrug, then nodded toward Stacy and Shamus. I had known Stacy for a long time... which had started with me using her to meet Shamus and Heath and hope they didn't kill me in the street. She had grown up.

"Shamus knows, and he taught his. It's only right I teach mine," he continued.

"Fair enough!"

It was a magical experience, everyone moving around the room and laughing, sharing stories. Niko was finally captured by Ranger and convinced to give up stories about Dirk's childhood, which everyone knew would be used as fodder in the coming days. Heath joined in with stories about Landon; however, no one was going to use those stories against that werewolf.

They might not tease Dirk either, not with Landon backing him up. We'll see. It'll all be in good fun.

As the afternoon moved into evening and the sun started to get low, Heath and I met back at the family table.

“Would you like some?” he asked, pouring a glass of bourbon. “There’s plenty, and no reason I should drink it all by myself.”

“I can’t. It’s yours, and it’s special to you,” I said, trying to reject the glass.

“Just a taste then. I think it’s amazing, but I want your opinion.”

I sighed, taking the glass. I intended to sip and give it back, but he started pouring another for himself.

“Go on,” he ordered, chuckling as I was reluctant to drink the bourbon his late son had given him. “For me.... for Richard and Landon, too.”

I lifted it and took a drink.

The glass dropped from my hand as I hit the floor. The last thing my mind registered was the rush of magic I could smell as something made the world go black.

18

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I woke up on the ground, dirt on my cheek, tired from whatever the night before had brought me. There was a crunch as I planted my hands and pushed up, groaning in sore pain. I was in my territory, that much was clear, but how I got there was a mystery.

“Good morning,” a voice rumbled.

I was able to get to my knees, rubbing my temples as a headache was already pounding before I could even properly wake up and come to terms with my situation. Those were the worst of headaches.

“I said good morning,” the deep voice rumbled again.

“Good morning,” I hissed, rubbing harder, hoping I wasn’t in the situation I was beginning to think it was. “What do you want, Fenris?”

“To find out how you got so trashed that you passed out in the woods,” he answered, barely hiding the laughter in his voice as he explained where I was.

“Well...” I tried to remember, but it was blank. “Fuck. Maybe I got hit in the head a bit too hard. I was told that could be a problem if I kept letting that happen.”

That was when I remembered one important thing.

Fenris was dead. He died months ago.

I turned to look at him, seeing him as healthy as he had been the entire time I'd known him. He was perfectly fine, with a shit-eating, half-mad grin on his face and a challenge in his eye as he crouched beside me.

"The Rebel finally partied too hard, huh?" Fenris laughed.

Fenris is dead. What is happening right now?

"What is going on?" I asked, fear beginning to rush through me.

"I found you lying here. You tell me what the fuck is going on right now, Rebel." Fenris straightened up, and I scrambled to my feet. "Not sure why you're so scared of me. Something else in these woods I need to know about? Ah, fuck it. We both know I am the scariest thing out here." He pointed at me. "But you know you don't need to be scared of me. What's wrong with you, Rebel?"

I wanted to cry. Was it all a terrible dream? Was this really Fenris?

No, it can't be. I wasn't the only person who saw him die.

"Where's Landon?"

"Oh, you're asking about him over your man? I don't know where either one of them is. We should go look for them. They might want to know how I found you out here." Fenris started walking, and it was a trail I knew well that led right back to my house.

I moved quickly to keep up, hoping to understand what was going on.

"Fenris, what day is it?" I asked, brushing off bits of leaves from my jeans.

“Fuck if I know. I forgot my phone, and I generally don’t care what day of the week it is. If I’m needed, Teagan comes to get me to force me to show up at whatever Everson wants me to be at.”

“You’re really not helpful right now,” I said, sighing heavily.

“When am I ever helpful?”

“The witches and stuff in Dallas. Helping Arlo.” Fenris had been invaluable in both of those situations.

“Yeah, but both of those required violence. A good time to be had by all. Well, there was a potential for violence when trying to help the kid.” Fenris chuckled darkly. “I guess there’s always a potential for violence.”

“Yeah, you would think that.” I shook my head, knowing he was just throwing up walls to keep people scared of him. To keep me scared of him. He was the mad wolf to everyone for a reason. I saw through most of his bullshit now. He had a heart and a sense of loyalty under his rough surface.

We walked in silence for a while, trudging along toward my home. It felt longer than it should have, as though the trail stretched out endlessly. Eventually, I didn’t recognize the trees around me, and we never reached my house.

“Fenris, aren’t we heading to my place?”

“Yeah, where else are we going?” he asked, scoffing at me. “Think I’m leading you to some trap or something? I don’t particularly want to spend the rest of my life on the run from Everson. Plus, I like you. We’ve fought together.”

“It’s just we should have been back already...” I said, slowing down to a stop.

He looked over his shoulder at me but didn't stop moving.

"Maybe you don't know these trails as well as you thought."

But I know these trails better than anyone... don't I?

I caught up to him again.

"You know, while we walk, we should really talk about how you blacked out in the woods. Dangerous business for one of our kind," Fenris said, shaking his head. "Real bad. Maybe you should tell Everson about it."

"I was planning on it," I said softly, knowing I absolutely had to tell Heath. He would help me find answers if he didn't know them himself.

"Or maybe you shouldn't. He might kill you for potentially losing control over yourself. It's what a smart Alpha would do." Fenris pointed back at her.

"He wouldn't," I said to myself more than Fenris, a lie that both of us would be able to smell.

"Maybe you're right. Maybe he wouldn't because he loves you. You don't know that, though." Fenris barked out a laugh, his head going back in that mocking laugh. He stopped walking and pointed up, staring at the sky. "The sun is going down fast, huh?"

I followed his gaze to the sky, and it was, with sunset already over us.

"He's coming," Fenris whispered, and I could smell his fear.

"Who?"

“Him.” Fenris didn’t look at me, only staring as the sunset turned to night faster than it should have. “You should run,” Fenris said sadly.

I didn’t need a name for some reason. I had no idea who he was talking about, but I didn’t need a name. I knew this was bad, and we had to get moving. Instinct was kicking in, and I was going to listen to it.

“You should come with me,” I growled, grabbing his elbow. “Fenris, come with me. We’ll get to my place. We’ll be safe.”

Fenris finally looked away from the sky, his eyes searching my face.

“You think you can keep us out of his reach?”

“I’m damn well going to try,” I snarled, pulling him hard. A howl began, and it echoed endlessly in the forest around us as we started running.

I wasn’t sure how much time or distance we had on our pursuer, but I didn’t let the fear of that unknown make me look back. I kept hold of Fenris’s elbow, forcing him to keep pace with me.

Together, we’ll get out of this. We have to. We’ve gotten through worse shit.

I kept up on the trail, hoping to see my house. I couldn’t feel where we were being chased from, though, even though we were certainly in my territory. I should have been able to feel the other werewolf, but I couldn’t.

I heard it running behind us after some time, though. Fenris and I were panting, but we didn’t relent. It was catching up, anyway. It didn’t matter how fast we were going, it was catching up to us.

“We might have to fight it,” I said through labored breathing.

“We can’t, Rebel. If it catches us, we die.” He didn’t sound much better.

“You don’t know that!”

“I do! I’ve been running from it for a long time!” Fenris picked up speed, and my legs burned to keep up with him, but the lightning-fast footfalls of the werewolf pursuing us kept coming, and they were getting louder.

We never reached my house. It made no sense. I didn’t understand. My lungs and legs were burning, and my head felt like it was going to split open as I skidded to a stop at a cliff, Fenris right beside me.

As I panted, desperately looking for another option, he only sighed.

“It’s been a fun ride,” he said.

“What? Fenris, no?—”

He pushed me to the side as the werewolf, one I could finally see was in its Last Change, jumped out of the darkness. It sent them both over the cliff.

“FENRIS!” I screamed as I scrambled to the edge. I leaned over, trying to find them, but they were gone.

He was gone, and there was nothing I could have done to stop it.

I sobbed and screamed hopelessly, knowing he wasn’t going to call back, but I kept screaming until my voice was gone. He never came back.

We could have escaped together, damn it!

We could have done it...

With a growl of anger and grief, I made a decision. I couldn't see or hear them, but I knew they had fallen.

I was going to climb down. I looked at my hands, seeing how they had gotten torn up from being shoved down by Fenris. My right elbow was also torn open. I had no climbing gear, but I was a tough fucking werecat and my friend was down there. If he was dead, then I could at least take him home. He was an annoying friend, but he was mine.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

HEATH

As he fell fast and hard, the glass tumbling out of her hand and spilling bourbon all over the floor. He could smell magic, thick in the air, suddenly activating like someone had just cast a spell.

Heath dropped his glass, falling to his knees to get to her, but someone grabbed him, pulling him back. He didn't register who it was. He turned fast, his fist slamming into a jaw, then he was back to reaching for her.

"Jacky!" he yelled, and it was the only thing he heard. The rest of the world muted as he grabbed her face, trying to see if he could wake her. "Jacky, wake up. Please."

"Pa, let me help. Don't touch the spilled bourbon. You could go down, too!" Hands grabbed his shoulders, and he snarled, but they didn't release him. He fought the one pulling him back, but somehow, this werewolf was stronger than him.

"Pa, it's me. It's Landon. Come here. We have to make sure?—"

"Make sure she's alive!" he roared.

"Pa!" The person holding him got around him and slugged him.

Heath went back, his head nearly bouncing on the floor, but someone had a hold on him still, keeping him from going down that far.

He blinked, seeing his son Landon with a fist ready to swing again. Landon looked terrified, which wasn't right. Landon wasn't scared of anyone, certainly not him. Heath never wanted his son to be afraid of him. Behind Landon, Dirk was beside Jacky, checking her pulse. Niko was right there with him, looking over his shoulder.

"She's alive!" Dirk said loudly for everyone to hear.

"Yeah, I can hear her heartbeat. Let me get her off the floor," Niko snarled.

Take a couple of deep breaths... Take control of the room. Figure this out.

His commands to himself were the only way Heath could think to pull himself together. He relaxed in Landon's grasp, meeting his son's gaze.

"Are you sane?" Landon asked him softly. "You knocked out Shamus. I need to make sure."

Heath nodded and was glad to know his son was nice enough to help him discreetly maintain his own balance before fully letting him go.

"I need orders, Alpha," Landon said strongly.

"Niko, take her back to the house and secure her in our room. Dirk, go with him, get everyone from your family on a call. Carey, go with them. Stay with Jacky if you want, or go to your room and lock the door. Landon, secure the building once they've left. No one in. No one out."

"Yes, sir," Dirk and Landon responded in unison.

“I need gloves,” Niko called out. “Anything will do. I don’t want this shit touching my skin. No idea what it will do.”

“Oliver, gloves from the kitchen, please,” Heath said coolly, and the human complied. Heath didn’t take his eyes off her, the woman who owned his heart, unconscious on the floor. He paid attention to the slow rise and fall of her chest, focusing on it intently, letting it keep him as grounded as he could manage.

Oliver ran, getting the gloves for Niko. He snapped them on and picked up her, carrying her out without another word, Dirk running to keep up with him. Carey was the last to leave, Landon lingering at the door for some time. Heath knew he was waiting to see that Dirk had grabbed Carey to help her get home faster.

With Jacky in the care of her brother and away from Kick Shot and his daughter away from the scene of the crime, he could finally focus on everyone else.

Carey, Dirk, and Niko were allowed to leave because he knew none of them had anything to do with this. Landon was the one locking the doors because he wouldn’t have done it, either.

Everyone else was a suspect.

“Stacy, Kody, you can pick your father up off the floor and put him in a booth, then find separate tables to sit at. Ranger, you will find a private booth across the room from Shamus. Jenny, there.” Heath pointed to a table in the corner. “Carlos over there.” He pointed to a different table for him, far from Jenny. “Roselyn, Piper, same deal. Sit across the room from each other. Teagan, Benjamin can stay with you as a minor. Arlo, find a private booth to sit in. No one will speak to each other. Put your phones on the table in front of you.”

No one moved quickly enough for him, and he snarled, which set off Landon.

“You heard your Alpha,” Landon snapped, pushing Kody to move, which started the chain of events Heath desired.

By the time they were all sitting and their phones were on the tables in front of them, the room was thick with fear.

“Oliver, take all the human staff upstairs. Windows will remain locked and closed. I’ll be speaking to them first.”

He should have been able to trust Oliver with that. He saw no reason for Oliver to betray Jacky or anyone else here, but he didn’t know if he trusted Oliver enough to rely on his testimony about the rest of the staff.

I’ll interrogate all of them. No one is leaving until they speak to me.

“Landon, collect the phones from the humans after you secure these,” Heath ordered. Landon was already grabbing all the werewolves’ phones.

“Yes, sir.”

Landon waited at the bottom of the stairs, and each human handed over their phone before they went upstairs.

“Isn’t this illegal detainment?” a human was bold enough to ask. “We have rights. Shouldn’t the police be called instead of?—”

“Find a lawyer that’s willing to sue me,” he said coldly. Heath knew there were legal issues he was treading a fine line with. He knew there were certain arguments he could make about being a werewolf and at a pack function when the attack took place. There were also arguments about how this was Jacky’s private property.

He didn't care.

He hadn't moved since Landon forced him to calm down and take charge of the building.

"Landon, get gloves and secure that bottle. Pick one werewolf to mop up any that spilled. Leave everything that touched it at the back door. I'll take it with me."

Landon was constantly moving. Heath would have helped if he wasn't the Alpha or if the group was smaller. He was judging every face, taking in every scent, trying to get an idea of what happened, why it happened, and which of these trusted people had done it.

He found it highly unlikely it was done by a human unless one of them was secretly a witch they had never identified.

That meant yet another one of the werewolves he had brought into Jacky's territory had betrayed him and her. Those simple deductions kept him from feeling any guilt about what he was going to do once Landon was back by his side.

While Landon had been cleaning up the bourbon on the floor, then moving the bottle out of the room, Shamus groaned and opened his eyes. Heath looked at him, and Shamus grew afraid, realizing what he was waking up to.

"Is she o?—"

"She was unconscious but alive when Niko carried her out," Heath answered with no warmth in his words for Shamus. Shamus, smart werewolf that he was, stayed in his seat and offered no comment. Heath watched him check his pockets quickly and noted that his third was unsurprised to find his phone missing. Landon had taken it from his pocket.

Landon eventually got back to him, moving into position at his side, one step back. Heath didn't have to tell his son about his plans. He could smell the rage clinging to his second.

"Stand up," he ordered, power rolling through his voice as he robbed every werewolf in the room of their free will. Landon was the only werewolf who could even consider fighting it, and his son still lost, having accepted the position of second. Heath was experienced and strong enough, though, to intentionally aim the command at every werewolf who could hear him and exclude his son.

"Follow me to the pack house. Do not attempt to run, do not speak," Heath continued, keeping the power in his voice as he started to walk out of the bar. Landon unlocked the front door. "Landon, bring up the rear."

"Yes, Alpha."

Heath went carefully, not wanting to get anyone hit by any cars when they had to cross the street. They weren't good to him dead. Yet. Eventually, at least one of them was going to die. He had to make sure he killed the right ones.

There was no one on-site at the new packhouse, thanks to it being the weekend. The basement was finished, though, and he was glad it was. He led them down and divided all the couples and families as much as he could, putting them between the different cells. He hated the necessity of building silver-barred cells on most days.

Today, he was not so soft-hearted.

"Do not talk to each other," he said once all of them were secure. "Landon, call the crews and tell them to take the week off. We'll pay them for the week. You're also in charge of their containment. I'll be back. There are other things I need to see to now."

“I’ve got them,” Landon replied with a snarling smile

His son could have done this all for him, but Heath had wanted to. He’d wanted to march them out of Kick Shot and into the basement. It was also safer for him and Landon to do it together.

He went back to Kick Shot, stopping to check on Oliver but not freeing the staff yet.

“I will be back in one hour after checking on Jacky’s condition and discussing what happened with her family,” he told them. “Oliver is still in charge. If you leave, I’ll just find you later. It will only make this a longer process. Stay here, answer my questions honestly when I return, then you will be free to go... if you weren’t involved, of course.”

He didn’t stay to listen to complaints. They were all supposed to be working for another three to four hours anyway, so this was all their paid time.

He finally reached the house, his blood boiling as he considered how he was going to find Jacky. If her status had changed at all since Niko left with her, someone would have reached out.

He entered with purpose, going up the stairs into the room he shared with her to find Dirk and Carey there. Dirk was checking her forehead while Carey held her hand.

Neither said anything as he moved closer. He brushed his fingers against her cheek, aching for her to open her eyes and let them know she was going to be okay.

She looks so peaceful...

“She seems to just be sleeping, but I will tell you if anything changes.” Dirk hovered at his side.

“Thank you.” Heath turned on his heel and walked out, heading straight for her office, knowing he needed to face her family. He heard Carey whisper to Dirk how she fully trusted her dad to figure out who did this. Dirk gave a quiet agreement.

He could hear Niko before he was down the stairs. He could hear Jabari and Davor before he opened the door.

“Heath is coming,” Niko’s muffled voice said.

He didn’t knock.

Niko didn’t even turn in his direction. Heath walked all the way around Jacky’s desk, going to stand in the window where he could watch the tree line and be seen on camera. He looked at the screen, seeing that Aisha was with Jabari.

“How much do they know?” he asked Niko.

“These two have the full story as we know it. Poisoned bourbon. Wasn’t poisoned earlier in the reception. Someone in the building did it. Can we get an update from you?”

“I’ll wait for everyone else to arrive. Everyone who could be involved is secure,” Heath said, crossing his arms as he went back to staring out the window. He didn’t have to wait long, with Subira and Zuri showing up only a few minutes later.

“Thank you, Davor, for not reaching out to your father immediately, so I could hear this. I’ll tell Hasan what has happened after I know everything. I can’t risk him getting this news fresh without any details or a plan,” Subira said, Zuri over her shoulder. “This office is sound proofed. He won’t know anything is happening.”

Heath wasn’t sure if he agreed with that choice. As a father, he’d be furious if one of

his children was hurt and others kept it from him. It wouldn't have mattered what the relationship was like between him and his children. At the same time, he understood that it was easier for him to work with the family without Hasan there. He tried to take his other personal issues with Hasan out of the situation, like the things he had said in front of and to Landon and Dirk.

For now, I'll just be grateful he's not here. Dealing with him would only bog down what needs to be talked about right now.

"Now that everyone who can be here is..." Niko looked back at him. "I'll tell them the entire series of events up until I left."

Heath nodded and let Niko explain the reception to the moment he walked out of Kick Shot with Jacky, Dirk, and Carey. There was a control to the family, no one asking any questions about specifics. Niko gave a report, and they listened.

"I put her upstairs while Dirk reached out to Davor. We switched places once she was settled, and he had the call started. Carey has been with her since as well."

"What have you been doing, Everson?" Subira asked, her gaze cool, an expression he recognized. He saw it on himself in the mirror before.

"Containing the potential assassins," he answered. "Every human and werewolf outside of our families has been contained. The humans are still in the bar. The werewolves are in silver-barred cells. Landon and I will be questioning them once we know more about how to help Jacky. He's currently watching the werewolves since they are the more likely culprit. The humans are still on their paid hours, and I asked them not to run. If one tries, they're forfeit."

"You or I will have to go and see if there's anything we can concoct to help her rise from this sleep," Subira said, looking up at Zuri, who nodded.

“I’ll go. I know the area and the werewolves better than you do. I can help with the interrogations as well, if they want it.”

“Start packing,” the matriarch ordered. “Good work, Heath. Tell us everything about the bourbon.”

He did, explaining its origin, the facility where he had kept it, and everyone who touched it before the reception.

“However, the poison was added during the reception. I had three glasses, intermittently going back to the table. Everyone was moving around and talking. We’ll review the cameras to see who all went to that table at any point.”

“It was a party,” Niko said, sighing. “No one had their guard up.”

“And with so few people in the building, all of whom you see every day, there’s no reason to think that something like this would happen,” Jabari elaborated further, his words understanding. “Dirk and Landon are never going to forget their wedding day, that much is certain.”

That shook Heath a little, having not let that thought sink in. He was going to need to check on both of them after this was over to see if they wanted a new party to create better memories than the ones they would now have from today.

Later. First, I have to help her.

They continued talking for another hour, going over every potential resource they would have for the investigation. Zuri had her bag ready and rejoined the conversation in only thirty minutes. They would check cameras, and all of those had audio. Dirk and Davor were going to dig through the emails of every pack member first, then the humans, if they still didn’t have all the answers.

All the while, he thought of something important, but it seemed no one was willing to say it. Every minute that passed from the moment she hit the ground, Heath had more clarity.

“It’s important to know not only who did this but why and where it came from,” Jabari said to everyone.

Heath found himself studying Subira’s face, wondering how she kept it so blank.

“Heath, do you have something to say?” she asked softly.

“You’re all allowed to say the obvious... I was the target.”

“You were,” Jabari agreed. “But we’re not going to blame you for Jacky’s situation.”

You should. I brought this into her home.

I also promised to pick her over the werewolves every time, and I intend to keep that promise.

“When looking into their accounts, keep an eye on news or contacts from other werewolves?—”

“Davor can’t do it, then,” Subira said softly. “We can’t have a werecat acting in a potentially hostile way against the werewolves. It will weaken our unity against the witches. Dirk certainly can, regardless of his position with our family, since he’s not only a werewolf but your werewolf.”

“Jacky was hurt?—”

“But we can be certain she wasn’t the target,” Subira said, cutting off Jabari.

“Mother, you have never cared about these sorts of politics this much.” Zuri was the one with her and was able to look her mother in the eye.

Heath was actually unbothered by the idea that Dirk would have to work alone. If the werecat ruling family could only work to protect Jacky and help her, it was fine by him. He could handle other werewolves. He knew how.

Carey screamed. Heath was at the door before he could think. Dirk was thumping down the stairs as he rounded the corner to run up them.

“What happened?” Heath snarled.

“Jacky is bleeding. She’s got abrasions on her hands and elbows. It doesn’t make any sense.”

Heath ran past him to see Carey holding the same hand, but now she was staring at the open wounds on Jacky’s hand.

“Heath!” Niko called out. “Change in plans! Subira is coming instead of Zuri.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

Climbing down was dangerous, mostly due to the fact that I wasn't a professional climber. My hands hurt as I fought to get down the rocky cliffside, leaving blood on different hand holds I was trying to use. I was lucky there were ledges I'd be able to stand on at different points.

Halfway down the cliffside, I wondered why I was climbing down, frowning as I looked down, unable to remember why I thought this had been a good idea. I had to finish getting down now, though. If I tried climbing back up, the fall I would inevitably have would be even worse.

With less than twenty-five percent of the climb down finished, my arms were shaking from overexertion. I was finally lower than the tallest trees and into the last leg of my task. When I reached my last safe ledge, I could see the bottom. A fall could still break bones, but the right landing wouldn't be fatal. It was still a solid thirty feet, which meant I didn't want to fall, but it wouldn't kill me anymore.

I rested, staring at the glowing dawn through the trees, wondering if I had climbed all night. I couldn't remember why I was even there or what possessed me to pick up rock climbing as a hobby, but at least the view was magical, the light catching on the leaves.

"Okay, let's finish this and figure out what I'm doing out here," I said, shaking my head in frustration at my situation.

It was harder, the cliffside slicker as some pieces were covered in moss or just wet. With ten feet to go, I couldn't find a place to put my feet and knew I was going to fall.

I decided to jump instead, aiming to control it rather than slip and panic. With a hard thud, I hit the ground with my legs, sending me down to my knees, then into the dirt. I wasn't good enough to do a fancy roll or anything.

That was a shit landing. Ouch.

I pushed to stand up, knowing my knees were going to be bruised and swelling before the hour was up. I looked over my surroundings, not recognizing the trees, not sure where I could possibly be.

That confusion only lasted for a second, then it clicked.

Oh, home is nearby. I've never been over this way with the sun up.

I started walking, knowing the area more as I went.

I must have left last night and fallen asleep instead of getting home. That must be it. I must have gotten into an argument with them again.

I reached the trail I needed and saw my house come into view. A simple suburban-style home built on a nice piece of property since my parents didn't want to live in town now with Gwen and me in college.

There was a cold note to the breeze, and the trees had some red and yellow leaves left on the branches as I approached home.

"I hate being home for the holidays," I muttered. "It always ends like this. They're

going to be pissed I left for the night. I don't know why I keep doing this to myself."

I saw the cars parked outside, along with my ride. My one note of rebellion, something to piss them off, but they couldn't do anything about it. I bought the motorcycle at nineteen, deciding I didn't want just some bicycle to get to class. I still had the car they got me at sixteen, which was fine when I needed to get groceries, but I didn't want to put unnecessary miles on it if I didn't have to. It wasn't brand new like Gwen's, who had better grades, so they gave her a better car.

So, at nineteen, I got the motorcycle. Mom hated it, and the thought of that made me smile because it was at least reasonable for her to hate, unlike everything she hated about me.

I didn't knock, going straight through the front door, wondering why my hand was stinging. I looked down to see the road rash on my hands. I could feel it on my elbow as well.

"Jacky, there you are! We've been waiting on you," my mother said, already exasperated. She was suddenly in front of me and grabbed my hand. "Did you wreck that awful thing? This is what happens. Look at what you did to yourself."

"No," I snapped, pulling my hand back, hating how she could just grab me like that.

"Why can't you sell that thing? We got you a perfectly good car."

"It broke down three times since I started school. I needed something to commute to classes, and it was the cheapest option," I said, trying to walk around her. "We have this conversation every time. I only drive that car when I need the space. I can't let it break down again. I can't afford to replace it or keep repairing it."

"Well—"

“Enough, Mom. Let me wash my hands and clean this out,” I said, trying to get away from her by going into the half bathroom under the stairs. I tried to close the door, but a foot blocked it.

“Take a deep breath,” Gwen said, pushing in further. “You know that motorcycle is dangerous.”

“Yup,” I said, letting the water get warm before putting my raw hands underneath it, trying to clean out any potential debris. “Where’s Dad?”

“He was called into the office,” she answered, rolling her eyes. “On Thanksgiving of all days.”

Sure, called into work on Thanksgiving. Like anyone really believes that. He’s just hanging out with the “boys” so they can all avoid their families.

“I’ve been helping Mom in the kitchen since he left. You should join us, though... wear some gloves.”

“Mom never lets me help in the kitchen,” I reminded her.

“That’s not true.” Gwen reached out and pushed my shoulder lightly. “Come on.”

“I don’t know what weird timeline you live in, but in reality, Mom never lets me help with holiday meals. I’ll go in there, gloves or not, and she’ll say I’m doing everything wrong. Then I’ll get kicked out. After we eat, she’ll lament how you two had to work so hard to prepare everything, and my ungrateful ass couldn’t be bothered to help.”

“She doesn’t do that,” Gwen said softly.

I could smell something odd in the air, and that something made me look at her.

Liar.

“Then Dad will yell at me for being such a terrible daughter and how he raised me better and wonder why I just can’t be more like you,” I continued, ignoring her interruption and my insane thought that Gwen was lying. Gwen didn’t lie to me. She lived a different life than me and refused to recognize it.

“If it’s so bad, why do you even come home?” Gwen asked, crossing her arms as her gentle expression turned into a glare.

I wondered how other twins did, being so close and happy. Sometimes, I just wanted to strangle mine for asking questions like that.

“Because all of you will call me crying and getting angry if I don’t,” I answered, shaking my head. “So, I come home, hoping I finally have something good enough for them to praise me for instead of nitpicking every wrong.”

“Must be hard being you, Jacky, with all your friends and being popular enough to go to all the parties?—”

“I would trade all of that if my parents didn’t hate me for getting a B in biology.”

“Well, biology is really important in pre-med.”

“Stop. It was a B, not a failing grade. I was sick for two weeks and missed labs. Did they care? No.”

“You were fine. You could have still gone to the labs, Jacky.”

Gwen’s lack of sympathy made me roll my eyes. I had a fever of one-hundred-and-three and lost twenty pounds because I could barely eat anything and keep it down. I

had gone to the hospital after a week and spent three days there.

You could have gone to the labs, they say. Yeah, let's find out how many labs I miss if I'm dead.

There were days I wasn't even sure I was doing what I wanted with my life. Did I like the idea of pre-med and hopefully being a doctor one day? I wasn't sure anymore. I wanted to help people, and it was a way to help.

"Gwen, I need you in the kitchen," our mom called out. Gwen left me without another word. I closed the door and finished cleaning out my hands, then my elbow. I found the first aid kit in the cabinet underneath the sink and finished up before leaving the bathroom to face the music of spending an awful holiday with my family.

My dad arrived after that. I was hovering just outside the kitchen when he walked through the front door. He didn't look excited to see me. Sadly, even though we were identical twins, I was never mistaken for Gwen, which meant I would never accidentally receive the love or adoration they gave her.

"Jacqueline," he said, shaking his head as he looked down and probably saw my hands. "That stupid, irresponsible motorcycle finally did some damage to you, did it? Maybe you'll sell it now."

"How was work?" I asked, ignoring his attitude.

"Good." He put his coat on the rack, and I didn't move as he got closer. He wanted to go into the kitchen, and I was in the way. Both Gwen and Mom were absorbed in what they were doing, neither even realizing I was talking to him.

"Go in there and help them," he ordered.

“That’s all you’re going to say about work? It’s Thanksgiving. They made you work.” I frowned as something floral and awful hit my nose. I had thought it came from outside when he opened the door, but it was so strong now.

Perfume. Feminine.

No, he always hangs out with the guys on holidays to avoid us.

Something about the world tilted on me.

“I need some air,” I gasped, weaving around him. Something was wrong .

I escaped out the front door, taking large, heaving breaths, trying to banish the smell and the thoughts swirling in my head.

No. I can’t be thinking of that. Not right now. What I would give to forget...

The door opened and closed behind me, my dad having followed me out. He was quickly in my face, grabbing my arm.

“Pull yourself together, or I’m cutting you off for the last time, Jacqueline. I don’t know what sort of drugs you might be on to act this?—”

“I’m not on any drugs, asshole,” I growled, and it sounded inhuman. My father didn’t seem to notice. He did take note of how I yanked my arm away from him.

“You have been a troublemaker for years. I don’t know what you’re getting up to in college or what upset you, but you will pull yourself together and behave if you want to be in this house for the holidays.”

“Why do you smell like perfume?” I asked in a soft hiss.

“I don’t. See? Always looking to make a problem for everyone.” He scoffed and went back inside.

Liar.

I waited outside, trying to forget the smell that made me think he was lying. I don’t know why. I could smell the perfume. Mom and Gwen were going to notice. It wasn’t Mom’s. I knew the smell of hers, and she never had it on so strong.

I could hear them talking. Dad said I was just saying things and picking a fight with him for having to work on Thanksgiving. Gwen didn’t speak up at all as our mom was already starting in on about how I could never be bothered to help them with the holidays, that I was only there for the free food, driving in on my death trap of a motorcycle.

I’d help if you let me, but you don’t even try to teach me how to make anything the way you like. Every time I try, you say I can just figure it out by watching... but you don’t let me watch.

I rubbed my face, wondering how I could hear them so well. They were practically yelling about how much of a piece of trash I was, how I wasn’t a good enough daughter, how Gwen was so perfect and helpful and smart. I was an attention seeker who might need professional help.

I’m doing my best! I get good grades. I drive safely. I’ve never been arrested, suspended from school, or skipped class.

“Hey, Jacky, it’s time to eat,” Gwen said, sticking her head out the front door. It was enough to break me out of my internal dialogue, saying the things I wished they could hear from me. “Come on.”

I groaned, wondering if I really wanted to put myself through all that. I relented, knowing Gwen liked having the entire family together for the holidays. When she called and cried about how I was thinking about skipping this painful ritual, I felt it came from a good place. She just wanted her entire family there. My parents just wanted to find everything they could wrong about me, and skipping important family holidays to them must mean I was being a delinquent somewhere else.

I sat down in my regular spot at the table, staying quiet as food was passed around. I listened to Gwen say grace, always doing it so perfectly, so my parents asked her to every year.

“You couldn’t change into something nicer to sit down at the table?” our mother asked me once Gwen was done.

“There’s never been a dress code when it’s just us,” I said, not sure why this was going to be my mom’s line of attack this time. I looked at Gwen finally, taking in how she had switched her t-shirt for a blouse while I had been outside.

God fucking damn it, Gwen. We were both fine in jeans and t-shirts, and you’ve gone and upped their expectations on me again.

“I didn’t even bring anything like that with me this time,” I admitted, pointing at Gwen’s top.

“Then you won’t be in the family photos this year,” our father said, shaking his head. “Not looking like a slob. I want to use these for the Christmas cards.”

I glared at him, unable to stop my temper from snapping.

“And you think smelling like some other woman’s perfume is acceptable?” I growled. “Because you do. It’s really fucking obvious. How could you do that to

Mom?"

I didn't see it coming.

My mother reached across the table and slapped me hard .

"You will not destroy this family by starting obscene rumors and causing drama, Jacqueline. Get out."

I rocked back from the power of her slap. Without a word, I got up from the table and walked out, grabbed the first jacket I could get my hands on from the coat rack, and left.

It was bitterly cold outside now, snow beginning to fall as the sun was going down once again. My cheek burned because of how hard she slapped me. My eyes burned from the deeper wound she had torn across my heart.

I ran into the trees, not paying attention to where I was going, fighting the tears that would freeze on my cheek if I let them free. I had no idea where to go or what to do. I couldn't go home. There was no way I could go home.

It was pitch black by the time I stopped running, panting as I leaned against a tree. I slid down, closing my eyes.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

S hivering from the cold, I knew I couldn't stay outside forever. I had to find somewhere to stay. It felt like I was frozen stiff when I stood back up.

I had no idea where to go, so I just started walking. My head was fuzzy as I trudged alone. It was so damn cold, I figured that was the problem. I couldn't find any good trails, cutting through underbrush to get anywhere, to find anything.

There was a snap of a branch that wasn't me, and I stopped, trying to find the source of the sound. Fear filled me as something told me it hadn't been an innocent sound. That fear drove me to start walking again, cutting through the underbrush loudly as I tried to pick up speed and keep moving. I didn't know what was following me, and I really didn't want to find out.

I reached a river, unfrozen but surrounded by snow. I knew it was going to be cold, but the water looked calm, and I had no other options. I went for it, sliding down the bank and into the river, swimming as hard as I could to get across as I heard whatever was following stopped and growled. My lungs felt tight as I gasped for air, every muscle fighting against me as I tried to get across the river.

Shivering hard on the other side, I pulled myself out of the water and climbed up the bank. It wasn't until then that I turned around to see what followed me.

A massive sabretooth cat snarled at me. Its gold eyes were unnaturally bright as it

paced on the far side of the bank, unwilling to cross the river for now. It was bigger than any lion I had ever seen in the zoo, including the giant males.

I felt as if I recognized it, but that only added to my terror as I scrambled farther away from the bank.

It could have attacked me at any time... oh my God, it could have killed me and didn't. Where is this sense of déjà vu coming from? What...

I pulled my jacket around myself tighter, shivering as I got to my feet and started running again. As I ran as fast I could to get away from it, it roared, a sound that felt like it shook the world around me.

"Help!" I screamed as I broke into a clearing, hoping anyone could help me or even just hear me. All around me was snow lit by the crescent moon, and I stopped running, grateful for the light and unwilling to go back into the dark forest.

It's full of monsters.

Something responded to that call for help, though, and it wasn't anyone who could help me. Green glowed in the dark, and I stumbled back, falling into the snow.

One big, inhuman hand appeared in the light as the monster slowly moved into view. Its head was that of a wolf's, large fangs visible as it snarled. Covered in fur, the name of the creature was already known to me.

Werewolf.

I was shaking as I tried to get up, my legs weak from running from the giant cat. I had no idea if I could outrun this beast.

It sank low, stalking closer to me on all fours, its ears back.

Turning, I started running again, knowing I was in no condition for this fight. Last Change werewolves were dangerous. There was one thing that could fight the werewolf, though.

I have to get back to that cat. It can handle this.

I followed my own trail in the snow, hearing the snarling werewolf chase after me, closing the distance fast. I used trees to try blocking its view of me, but it didn't let up. Hair rose on the back of my neck, and I dove to the right, getting behind a fallen log as the werewolf jumped and soared over where I had once been. It regained its feet before I could, and as I scrambled away, it sank its teeth into my calf.

Screaming, I tried to grab anything I could to hit it with as it started to drag me across the forest floor. I kicked with my free leg until it was grabbed by one of those inhuman hands with claws instead of fingernails. Those claws dug into my flesh, and the grip alone threatened to break my bones.

Its teeth released my leg, and something hit my back, forcing me harder into the dirt. Claws sank into my shoulder, telling me it was the other hand. Snarling over me, I felt drool hit the back of my neck.

I could only look at my hands, scraping across the ground as I hopelessly tried to find purchase. I was in so much pain.

Something feral in me didn't want to die. I wasn't sure if it was me screaming or something in me or someone who sounded like me a hundred miles away.

The cat showed up and jumped onto the werewolf, knocking it off me but at the expense of my back and leg. Claws torn from my back left me wailing. My leg felt

broken.

As the fight became a vicious brawl, I crawled, pulling myself away from the fighting as fast as I could, struggling for every inch I could claim. I couldn't silence the whimpers of pain as I crawled under bushes to keep moving, trying to escape the fight between the monsters that were running around these woods. A tree creaked as one of the large monsters slammed into it. I wrapped my head, hoping it didn't come down on me. It missed me by a few feet, a blessing in the middle of the hellish night I was living.

I needed help, but there was no one. No one to help pick me up and carry me to safety. No one to protect me.

I crawled until I found a stump and tried to lift myself up, staggering as I realized neither of my legs wanted to hold any weight at all. The right was a bit sturdier, and I winced in pain as I forced myself to stand on it just to help myself onto the stump. My left leg was broken, with bruising and bleeding where it had been grabbed, but thankfully it was a simple fracture. The bones weren't sticking out, and I could work with that. While not broken, my right leg was bleeding terribly from the bite. I needed to clean it and wrap it up.

A roar, though, told me I didn't have enough time to treat my injuries. With no time to treat them, I tried to find a branch that would be sturdy enough to walk with.

I fell and tried walking on my knees as I grabbed branches off the forest floor until I found one. All the while, the vicious brawl continued.

Using it, I forced myself to my feet, or really my foot since I couldn't put any weight on my left.

“What did I do to deserve this? Where the hell is my family? I shouldn't be out here

dealing with this sort of werewolf alone.” I knew that, but thinking of Gwen, she wasn’t going to be out here helping. There was another sister.

“Zuri would know what to do,” I whispered, finally remembering my new family. “Hell, I would even take Mischa right now.”

I forced myself to limp as quickly as I could, perhaps too fast for the injuries I was dealing with.

“Once I find somewhere to hide, I’ll splint the broken one.” With desperate resolve, I forged deeper into the woods, fighting to make more distance between myself and the werewolf and werecat.

Werecat.

Moon Cursed.

“Fuck... what is wrong with me?” I whispered, realizing I was forgetting important things. “Oh, fuck. I’m a werecat... Why can’t I Change? I can heal if I Change.”

But as I struggled to walk, it felt like there was a big mental wall stopping me from reaching for the curse, letting that transition take over and make me a predator myself.

Eventually, I found a cave, too small for the other moon cursed in the woods. Before hiding inside, I knew I needed to gather what I needed. I used my free hand to gather several sticks. I had no rope, but I was willing to tear my clothing to make a splint if I had to. I crawled in and found a good spot that would block their sight and be out of reach of their claws.

“Deep breath, Jacky,” I said to myself as I prepared to do something that could

backfire. I had no other options.

I forced my leg bones as straight as I could get them, howling in pain as I did.

I didn't get to splint them. The pain knocked me out when I tried to do it a second time.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

HEATH

Fury and fear pounded through him as he watched Dirk and Niko wrapping Jacky's legs, which had suddenly started bleeding. Carey had texted him to let him know as he was finishing up his interviews with the human employees of Kick Shot. By the time he'd gotten to the house, one of her legs was broken.

"There's more blood," he said softly, battling to keep control of himself. "There's more."

"Underneath her. I think her back," Dirk said, finishing the wrappings on her broken leg, moving with care and precision. He put it down slowly and looked at his father.

Heath could only wait. The moment he had entered the room, Niko had told him to stay back, not needing another pair of hands getting in the way when he and Dirk worked well together.

Niko lifted her shoulder carefully and nodded.

"Yeah, there are puncture wounds in her back now," Niko said, the words dry and rough like gravel. "We'll need to roll her. Wrap the sheet around her waist."

"Can I help now?" Heath was shaking with the need to help her.

“No. I think you need to tell me what the humans were saying when we interrupted you,” Niko said, looking over Jacky’s body.

There was a territorial battle now as Heath felt the itch of annoyance at the werecat keeping him from the woman who owned his heart. He was going to stop caring that Niko was her brother quickly if Niko forgot how to share. He felt his lip rise and couldn’t stop the snarl that left him.

“Did you leave Landon with the other werewolves?” Dirk asked, ignoring the growl.

“Yes. Do you two want to go hang out with them, or will I be able to help the woman I plan to marry?” he snapped.

Niko snarled at him, leaning farther over Jacky.

“Threaten my son and I’ll gut you, wolf,” the older werecat promised.

“You two can’t treat injuries on her back without me.”

“Then get Carey back in here, and she can help us. You are not in the right headspace to be helping anyone injured right now. Go deal with your traitors and get back when that’s over.” Niko rose up. “Or I’ll throw you out.”

“I live here.”

“It’s Jacky’s house.” Niko raised his chin with that defiant expression Heath had seen on hundreds of faces. “If I need to get rid of you to make sure Jacky gets the help she needs, then I will. You need to step back. Subira won’t tolerate this sort of shit, Everson. Get a handle on it.”

“We need a real healer,” Dirk whispered, already rolling Jacky over. She was nude,

the dress and everything else with it now discarded. Heath wished he could cover her, but while he was mad at the male werecat, he wasn't going to kick her family out of the house, not really. He needed one thing to be grateful for, and that thing was going to be that her family were the ones handling her in such a vulnerable state.

And in her own bed. I can be grateful for that, too...

He tried to find those things to be grateful for as he watched Dirk finish rolling her, exposing the large punctures in her back. Niko started cleaning them out, sighing.

"Nothing vital was hit... by whatever is doing all of this," he said, shaking his head with the same dismay they all felt.

"We need a real healer, Alpha," Dirk repeated, looking at him for something. "Or better equipment and supplies. Our first aid kit can do a lot, but the sun hasn't even gone down yet. Subira won't be here until the morning because she has to fly in. Once she's here, I'll be able to get to work on other things, hopefully. I can't do this and investigate the pack at the same time."

Heath kept staring at Jacky's body, the holes in her back and the blood trying to seep through her bandaged legs. The previous injuries had been minor. The scrapes on her hands and elbow, the bruise showing up on her cheek... those had been small.

This proved these injuries could be fatal. He'd seen what the injuries had looked like.

Something bit her. Something sank its claws into her... but not here. She's been protected here the entire time...

"Find whatever you need to keep helping her," Heath finally said to Dirk. "You don't need to worry about the pack yet. She's the priority for you. I'll handle the pack however I need to." He turned around, knowing he needed to get out of the room, or

he would never find out who did this to her. It didn't matter that he was the real target, that it was supposed to be him in that state. The reality was it was her, and heads were going to roll.

"Thank you, Alpha," Dirk said as Heath closed the door behind him.

Heath found Carey in the living room, waiting for him to come down. Her eyes, the one thing he definitely gave her, were wide with fear that matched her scent. He reached out and pushed the hair from her face. Fear made her look younger than she was.

She's so close to grown. I don't want to do this, but I don't have any choice.

"You have two options, sweetheart. You can go up there and listen to Niko and Dirk about what help they need, or you can go to your room and talk to?—"

Carey walked past him and went up the stairs, her decision to help Jacky not needing to be said.

Heath walked out, knowing this was going to live with his daughter. It was going to live with all of them, at least the ones who lived through it.

Heath went back to Kick Shot first. He was on the last human for interviews. He reached the upstairs office to find Oliver and the cook he'd been talking to.

"Did you tamper with anything at all before or during the reception?"

"No," the cook said as Heath faced him.

"Did you bring anything foreign into the building?"

“No.”

Both were the truth, so Heath looked at Oliver, the first he had interviewed, just to be certain of the human’s trustworthiness.

“Let them all go home.” Heath turned and left them there, leaving Kick Shot as quickly as he could, not wanting to linger near the place where Jacky had fallen.

He went to the packhouse. It had been hours since he left Landon there with them in cells. He went to the basement and found Landon there, still waiting, looking relaxed as he leaned on the back wall. The pack was beginning to look tired. Most were struggling to stay awake. Ranger and Shamus were the most alert, a sign they still knew their positions and that more was expected of them.

Heath needed to decide who to interrogate first. He’d be able to find the truth going through them one by one, but he wanted more than just the admission or to catch one of them in a lie. He wanted everything . He wanted all the evidence. This went beyond who in the pack had betrayed him and gotten Jacky hurt. He wanted solid evidence to throw in the face of whoever had bought one of his werewolves.

“Landon, come with me,” Heath said, going back upstairs with his son. Once they were on the ground level, Heath walked farther away, making sure none of the pack could hear them.

“Ranger or Teagan?” Heath didn’t clarify that.

“Teagan. Age plays against him here. He knows older wolves who might decide you’re an enemy. However, if he’s clear, he’s good to keep around to help us since you’re clearly losing some control, Pa.” Landon nodded toward him. “And I smell Jacky’s blood. What the hell is happening over there? Did someone take a sample or something?”

“Something is injuring her, but we don’t know what or how. She’s still unconscious. Something broke one of her damn legs,” Heath said, a growl punctuating the end.

“Fuck. Okay. Teagan is also old enough to know how to help with medical aid if you pick him first. Ranger is experienced in it, though, with his military and police force training. He’s competent.”

“Subira is also on the way to help her daughter,” Heath continued. He’d left Landon without news for too long. “All the humans are clear. One of those werewolves did this. There’s no question about that now.”

“Flip a coin,” Landon said, shrugging.

“Teagan it is,” Heath said, knowing both wolves had a potential reason for being behind this. Teagan was once a member of Corissa’s pack. Heath and Landon had killed Sheila, Ranger’s lover. It didn’t matter if neither of them had ever acted like those things mattered to them. Heath stopped before he got to the basement, only a shred of humanity making him recognize one thing.

“Clear Arlo and Benjamin while I talk to Teagan. I know it couldn’t have been them. Too young, nothing to bribe them with.”

“Yes, sir,” Landon said. Heath could smell the relief from his son at his directive.

Interesting. Something is making you soft, Landon.

On any other day, that would be a good thing.

Perhaps it still is.

Heath went downstairs and stopped in front of the cell with Teagan.

“Teagan, with me,” Heath ordered. “Everyone else, hold in position.” He let power roll through the second half, making sure they hadn’t secretly plotted to escape together.

Teagan rose up and followed him out. Landon went to get the boys next, holding both of their shirts. Together, they all walked to Kick Shot, leaving the others locked below the unfinished packhouse. Oliver and the other humans were already long gone, having run to freedom the moment Heath had given them permission. Heath took Teagan into the office while Landon kept the boys downstairs.

“Sit. You know what I want. You’ll answer honestly and completely. A single lie forfeits you. I won’t give you an opportunity to explain it.”

“Of course, Alpha,” Teagan said softly, sitting down.

“Did you add anything to the bourbon bottle on the family table?”

“No, sir. I never contaminated it, intentionally or unintentionally.”

Heath released some of his tension, glad that the likelihood he had to kill this wolf had just dropped drastically.

“Did you see anyone acting suspicious?”

“I saw nothing I considered suspicious at the time, sir. Many of the pack went to look at the bottle since they aren’t old enough to own such things. Shamus even told his children that he was disappointed he didn’t have something similar for both of them. He picked it up to read it, but that didn’t seem suspicious at the time, lamenting about the position his ex-wife left him in when it came to preserving the history of them growing up.”

That sounds like Shamus.

“Give me a list of names you saw approaching the bottle.”

“Shamus, Stacy, Kody, Carlos, Jenny, Roselyn, and Arlo.”

Heath could smell the fear that Teagan had when saying Arlo’s name.

“What did the boy do?”

“He sniffed it, and I went over to him to tell him that he was still too young to be drinking, werewolf or not. Also that I would let you skin him for drinking your liquor.”

“I see. The others?”

“I only remember Shamus clearly because his lamenting made me laugh,” Teagan said, sighing. “And I’m certain I didn’t see everyone. I wasn’t watching your table, of course.”

“Of course.” Heath finally sat down. “Who do you think did this?”

“I have no idea who in the pack would try this without potentially incriminating them falsely. Everyone in the pack has their weak spots. Roselyn and Piper are only here because other packs have issues with their relationship. Jenny and Carlos are here because Carlos has nowhere else to go. Ranger is maimed; he’d never survive another pack. Shamus is here for his kids, who were thoroughly traumatized by what happened in Dallas when you weren’t their Alpha. Some of those can be used against them, some of them can’t.”

“All of them would have to be bought to betray me. Clearly, someone was. Any

suggestions of who would buy someone in my pack to attempt poisoning me?”

This was when Teagan seemed less comfortable, shifting around his seat and rubbing his hands on his legs.

“Teagan, you know why I’m asking you.” Heath needed this wolf to say it. Teagan, who had been around when the Tribunal formed and much longer before that, once a member of Corissa’s pack.

“I do,” Teagan said softly, closing his eyes. “You’re asking me if I think Callahan and Corissa are capable of poisoning a potential rival who may have caused too many problems for them just by existing.”

“I am.”

“Yes, they are,” Teagan confirmed. “I believe they are completely capable of it.”

“I’m glad we agree.” Heath stood back up and held a hand out to Teagan, who took it in a firm handshake. He helped Teagan to his feet. “Thank you for being honest with me. I need you to help Dirk and Niko keep Jacky alive. Landon will escort you and the boys there.”

“Are they...” Teagan’s fatherly worry was immediate.

“Landon has been talking to them downstairs. I’m certain he’s already decided they’re fine to leave with you to the house. We know they wouldn’t.”

“They wouldn’t. They would never. They love your daughter, and they respect you. Arlo has hero worship of Jacky?—”

“I know,” Heath said as gently as he was capable of. It was hard to be gentle right

now.

He and Teagan went downstairs, and Heath sent Landon off with them to go to the main house. When Landon was back, he looked furious.

“What now?” Heath demanded.

“Dirk drove off for some reason!” Landon snarled.

“He went to get more supplies to help Jacky,” Heath said quickly. “Now, I need your help with Ranger and Shamus.”

“Why are we doing these three first?” Landon asked. “Why not some of the others more likely to betray us and find the right person faster?”

“Because I need to make sure my strongest and smartest are on my side,” Heath answered. “We’re going against the Tribunal werewolves. I need them helping if they’re loyal and dead if they aren’t. The others are easier to deal with and less costly to lose.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

DIRK

Dirk knew he was going to get in trouble for what he was doing the moment he had come up with the idea. He drove fast, pushing his truck to the limit and weaving around anyone not moving fast enough. He was putting the magic wrapping the truck to its limit. He was certain he'd eventually be going fast enough that even magic wouldn't stop a police officer from pulling him over.

It's for Jacky. I'm doing this for Jacky.

It was a four-hour drive based on the route he found to go to Olivia Kessler, the witch who specialized in potions and healing. He could do it in two if he drove fast enough. When Jacky's injuries escalated, he knew she would bleed out if they didn't get the right help. With her knowledge of potions, Olivia could help Subira.

It was fucking risky, though. She was a witch. She had nothing to do with what happened in Dallas, but he knew this was going to drive a firm wedge between him and every werewolf loyal to Heath.

Fuck the pack. The family will understand. They'll know why I'm doing this. I'm Jacky's wolf. I hate that sometimes, but I'm her fucking werewolf.

Caught at a red light and growling, he decided it was time to call the witch herself.

The phone only rang once.

“Olivia Kessler?—”

“Olivia, this is Dirk Brandt. We met when Jacky Leon and I visited your home. I need your skills as a healer, and I’m already driving to get you.”

“Um... get me? You couldn’t bring the animal here?”

“It’s Jacky. She’s been poisoned, and something else is happening. I need your magic and skills.”

“I’m not a human doctor,” she said. “Mr. Brandt, I’m sorry, but?—”

“Don’t! Don’t tell me right now that you can’t help. You can. Even if you can identify the poison used would be a great help. We have other help coming, but by then, it might be too late.” The sun was already going down. By the time he was back with Olivia, it would be night. “There is no one else we can ask. We can’t trust any witches we haven’t personally verified aren’t involved in other things. You’re the only person I can ask. Jacky Leon is a member of the werecat ruling family, and she needs help. Do you understand what’s at stake here?”

“I’ll... I’ll call my friends at the clinic to watch the animals here,” she said softly. “I’ll be ready when you get here.”

“Good. I’ll be there in one hour.” He hung up on her and hit the gas the moment the light turned green.

An hour later, he was in front of her house. There were other vehicles there, but he paid them no mind, coming to a hard stop in front of her house. She ran down from the porch, carrying multiple bags. He reached over and got the door for her, pulling

bags closer to him and transferring them into the small backseat as she threw them in. Once she was in and the door closed, he hit the gas. She got her seatbelt on by the time they got down the dirt driveway.

“How serious is this?” she asked. “What are the symptoms, and how was it delivered?”

“She’s unconscious, but something is causing injuries to her. She’s been secure at home, but she’s just... manifesting these wounds like scrapes on her hands, bite marks, punctures, bruises.”

“I see. Okay...” Olivia looked panicked. “I’ve never heard of anything that can do all of that. I know of some herbs that can be concentrated and deadly if the potions aren’t properly made, but it’s similar to human medicine. Overdosing on things will hurt someone. Many good medicines can also be poison.”

“There are no symptoms that seem to be caused by the poison itself. Nothing traditional like vomiting blood yet...” Dirk nearly bent the steering wheel as he thought of the bloody bite mark on Jacky’s half. “This is different. Even if you can’t identify the poison, we need your healing skills.”

“I can help with that. I can do that.” She didn’t sound certain, but she wasn’t lying, either.

“Hold on. I can’t be distracted while driving. We’re going to be going fast.” He accelerated, and it pushed her back into the seat.

“This wasn’t what I expected from my day,” she said, holding onto the door handle with a white-knuckle grip.

“Me neither. She was poisoned at my wedding reception,” Dirk growled out,

wondering how his day went this way.

“Oh...” Olivia seemed thrown by that. “Isn’t she engaged to a werewolf?”

“She’s my aunt, through three adoptions. She’s engaged to my Alpha, Heath Everson. I have a mate bond with Landon Everson, Heath’s biological son. We decided to get married, and today was the wedding,” Dirk explained, not sure why he cared to explain it all. Maybe it was the not-very-subtle way she had implied he was married to Jacky. He found the talking good, though. It helped him in a way he hadn’t thought he needed.

“Three?”

“My father adopted me. He’s adopted by his parents. Jacky is adopted by the same parents. If any one of those adoptions wasn’t there, she and I would have no relation,” he further explained. “Most people in my family are adopted. Sometimes, it’s weird to call them my family. They’re werecats. I’m a werewolf now. I was human when I was adopted. Being a werewolf wasn’t part of the life plan anyone had for me.”

“You’re... a member of the werecat ruling family?” Olivia clearly hadn’t expected that.

“If you ask the matriarch of the family, yes... and she’ll be in the country tomorrow morning. She’s coming to help Jacky.”

Olivia looked pale and faint, so Dirk stopped talking and focused on driving.

It didn’t matter how many adoptions were between him and Jacky.

She’s my aunt, and I’m her werewolf. She’s not allowed to fucking die on me, not after everything she’s done for me.

He ignored calls to his phone, knowing Landon would strangle him for that later and knowing Heath would be pissed, and he was the last person to upset in their current situation. Dirk drove, knowing he was taking a risk and knowing he was taking it for Jacky.

He didn't think of anything except avoiding accidents after that. Once he pulled in front of her house, his tires screeching at his hard stop, he felt like he could breathe again. He grabbed her bags for her, able to carry them much easier.

"Follow me. Move fast."

He jumped out with her bags and ran to the front door. He was glad Landon and Heath seemed to be somewhere else. He got her inside and up the stairs, knocking on Jacky's room before opening it as well.

"Dirk, where have you been?" Niko snarled. "Landon and Heath are pissed. You've been avoiding their calls. And who is that?"

"Help. Olivia, this my father, Nikolaus, son of Hasan, member of the werecat ruling family, the youngest son actually," Dirk said quickly, getting her into the room and kicking the door closed. He put her bags down. "Niko, this is Olivia Kessler. She's a vet and a healer. She has training and has already been cleared of being involved in the other shit. I told Heath we needed help."

"You're insane. You disappeared for over four hours and brought a witch back? Heath might kill you when he finds out," Niko hissed. Then he turned, and Dirk followed to see Teagan, his eyes wide as he took in the scene in front of him. "And he's going to find out unless you want to kill the over two-thousand-year-old werewolf over there."

"Killing me won't stop him from finding out," Teagan said quickly. "You should

contact Landon, tell him you're back and about this first, though. Olivia, I'll be watching over you. Come here and start looking over our patient. Get as much done as you can before you're found. Try anything funny and... well, there are three moon cursed in the room who can and will kill you."

"Uh-huh," she whimpered, moving toward Jacky in the bed and starting to do stuff. Dirk didn't pay attention after that, texting Landon about where he was and how he needed to talk to him without Heath.

It took Landon a minute to get into the room, his nostrils flaring. He would have smelled the newcomer by Dirk's truck and followed it as well as getting to Dirk. Before Landon could do anything more, Dirk was in front of him, holding his mate's arms.

"Do you trust me?" Dirk asked quickly.

Landon leaned back, his eyes narrowing for a moment.

"Landon, I need an answer right now."

"Yes," Landon finally forced out. "But Pa is going to be?"

"I'm her wolf," Dirk said with conviction. "I'll fight him over it. I'll leave the pack if I have to. I'm her wolf. This is for her. We needed more help, and we needed it faster than Subira can get here. We don't know when the next injuries will start. She's a healer, and Heath told me to prioritize Jacky. I am."

"Then I'm with you," Landon said, his shoulders relaxing. "He's interrogating Shamus right now. Ranger has been cleared, and he's doing your work right now, looking into everyone's accounts. Arlo and Benjamin are both in Carey's room on the floor, watching movies on her computer with her. He'll be here any minute. He

would know why I ran out and will show up the moment he knows Shamus is on our side.”

“How bad is this?” Dirk asked, knowing the basics of everything.

“He’s certain this was orchestrated as a hit on him by Callahan and Corissa. The fact that Jacky was the one who ended up like this was probably not their intention, but it doesn’t matter whether it was intentional or not. She’s there. They might have led to the moment it happened with their meddling to remove a rival.”

Dirk released his own shaky breath, moving to sit down on the end of the bed.

“Fuck.”

“Yeah, it’s bad,” Landon said, shaking his head. Right then, they could smell magic, and everyone looked at Olivia.

“I’m using magic to probe her and see if there are any injuries I can’t see, internal problems,” she explained as Teagan leaned over her. “No ruptured spleens or anything.”

“Good idea,” Dirk said, glad he had gone to get her. None of them could do that.

“Heath is moving now,” Niko said ominously. “He’ll be entering in... Five. Four. Three. Two. One.”

They all heard the front door opening and hitting the wall, then slamming shut again. Landon turned to face the door, blocking it. Dirk moved into a spot where Heath could see him but didn’t try to move Landon. Landon was the only person who was going to keep anyone in the room safe if Heath fully lost it.

Heath showed up in the door, his eyes ice blue.

“I smell magic,” the werewolf Alpha said, snarling as he stepped farther into the room.

“You do. There’s a healer in the room who needs concentration to try to find any internal injuries Jacky may have,” Landon said, holding his position.

“And who brought her here?” Heath demanded.

“I did,” Dirk said, lifting his chin.

Heath growled. He’d never really seen Heath like this. He’d known it was there. Everyone did. He told them all the time it was there. This was the Alpha that Callahan thought of as his rival, the ruthless and dangerous one who would kill anyone who threatened those important to him. This was the man who could handle the coup in Dallas and could teach his daughter how to escape werewolves before she turned eleven.

Dirk knew Heath was debating the fight he would have if he tried to kill Dirk and the witch. He’d have to kill his own son. He’d have to kill Niko. He would be left with Jacky, who needed help, and Teagan, who couldn’t offer the help she needed. He’d make enemies of every werecat in the ruling family. Subira would show up and destroy him.

“I trust him,” Landon said, moving slightly to block some of his father’s line of sight on Dirk.

“I know you do,” Heath snapped. “And he’s Jacky’s fucking wolf. He always has been.”

“Then Jacky can decide when she wakes up if this was worth the risk,” Landon said, slowly reaching out to his father, who moved back slightly to stop his son.

“She can... and if that witch does anything stupid, I expect you to be the one to kill her, Dirk.” Heath walked out, leaving them with that directive. “Landon, with me!” he called out before he left the house. Landon reached out to squeeze Dirk’s hand and went after his father.

Olivia whimpered once both strong werewolves were gone and nearly fell down, but Teagan caught her as Dirk was turning to check on her. Teagan wrapped his arms around her, holding her gently to keep her on her own feet, but it looked like her knees didn’t want to work.

“You didn’t tell me...” Her words were weak.

“Would you have come if I told you it was this dangerous?” Dirk asked.

Olivia didn’t answer, and he didn’t fault her for that.

Niko pulled out a flask from his coat and held it out.

“Sniff that, don’t drink it,” he said. Dirk grabbed it, opened it for Olivia, and shoved it under her nose. He knew the smell himself and understood why Niko made his recommendation.

“How did you convince Subira to give you a flask of this stuff?” Dirk asked, handing it back as Olivia looked like she was regaining the color in her face.

“I didn’t. Everyone calls Jacky the bad one, but I’m the real problem child. I’m just quiet enough to get away with everything most of the time,” Niko answered, sipping from the flask before putting it away.

They worked through the night. Olivia knew how to use real healing spells, but just removing the bruise from Jacky's cheek and begin healing her hands made the witch exhausted. They let her sleep after doing that much, taking watches over Jacky's prone form, which seemed stable for a little while.

Niko disappeared before dawn, and Dirk made breakfast while Teagan woke up Olivia to see if she had dietary restrictions. She was doing them a big favor, and Dirk wanted to honor that.

"She's a vegetarian," Teagan ended up telling him. "But willing to eat eggs when she needs the energy for bigger magic."

Of course she is.

He made her an omelet and sent Teagan up with it. He made meat for everyone else. When he got to the room, Olivia was already trying to keep healing Jacky's hands.

"Hey, you don't have to push yourself too much," he said, seeing how quickly she had cleared her plate.

"It's what I can do," she said, looking like she was about to cry.

He gently pulled her away with Teagan's help, and instead, they checked Jacky's injuries together, making sure she thought they were clean enough to continue healing naturally.

Then Niko got back. Dirk could feel magic as it filled the air, penetrating every one of his senses. It was more than smell like they normally identified magic being used. It was everything and everywhere, overwhelming and intense. Olivia sank to the floor, her eyes wide. Teagan leaned on the wall over her. Niko entered the room first, and there she was, the one they really needed.

Staff in hand and a small drawstring and leather bag on her back, Subira walked into the room confidently, her young face doing nothing to trick anyone about her age. The wisdom in her eyes was too deep, and the air of power around her was ancient.

“There’s Jacky,” Niko said softly as Subira walked past him, heading straight for Jacky.

“I see,” Subira whispered, running a hand over Jacky’s cheek. “You’ve all done well taking care of her so far. Good job.” She looked at Dirk, sadness in her eyes. “I’m sorry your happy day ended like this. Thank you for bringing her.” Subira used her staff to point at Olivia. “I will have need of you.”

“Oh?” Olivia couldn’t believe it, but Dirk knew why, as everyone in the family did.

“Yes. I am too powerful to heal the way you can. You have proper training, but you need more power. We can help each other. You will keep my daughter’s body alive. I will do the rest.”

“I’m not that powerful. Big healing normally requires groups of witches, and the best of them gets to control the spell, sometimes multiple?—”

“You need more, and I have it,” Subira said, putting her staff against the wall next to Olivia. “Get up. You know how to use the magic from someone or something else. It’s basic training, as you just mentioned. Part of how you heal in these times.”

“Yes,” she whispered.

Subira pulled out a knife and bowl from the bag. She cut open her hand and bled into the bowl until it was full, not seeming bothered by the loss.

“Here. Power,” Subira said, holding it out to Olivia, who seemed terrified of the

blood in the bowl.

“You...”

“I am the most powerful witch still active in the world. Take the offer and help my daughter,” Subira said, quickly losing her patience. Olivia took the bowl, her hands shaking. “Now, I will be unavailable. It’s difficult working around fae magic, but I can do it. I just need everyone to leave me be.”

“Fae?” Dirk looked at his dad, who had spoken at the same time.

“Yes, fae. This was done by something from the fae. Hasan is investigating. We’ll learn more when he has more. Now, leave me to work. Olivia, you can start healing whenever you’re ready. If you somehow need more, I shall offer it.”

Subira lay on the bed next to Jacky, her hand on Jacky’s cheek, and closed her eyes.

Dirk sat down, ready to help Olivia.

It was time to really get down to work.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“L ook at what you’ve done this time,” a deep voice said, smooth and annoyed.

I opened my eyes, not wanting to see the one speaking, but knowing I couldn’t run from him.

“Hello, Hasan,” I said, seeing him across the room, leaning on the wall, his gold eyes showing every single ounce of annoyance I had just heard in his voice. His natural eye color was some shade of brown, but I saw it so rarely now. Every time we had to speak, I had gotten into some sort of trouble and that made him feel certain ways. I always saw the gold in recent days, the same that I had, thanks to the curse. There were other shades of gold if someone was lazy with describing the colors, though most were too yellow or too orange to match Hasan’s particular pure gold. Except mine. Hasan and I matched perfectly.

“That’s all you have to say? Hello? Once again, I’ve wondered if you were going to survive another fight you shouldn’t have been in, and all you have to say is hello ?” His anger filled the room and left me sinking in the bed, unable to maintain eye contact with him.

“What else am I supposed to say?” I asked, crossing my arms. Everything hurt. My back and legs were the worst of the pain. Whatever fight I had gotten into had left me messed up.

“I want you to stop this nonsense before you die!” Hasan roared. “Before you break our family with that level of pain. We can’t lose you like Liza!”

“You won’t.” I tried to believe that myself. I had to repeat it to myself every day, hoping and praying it wasn’t going to be the day I didn’t make it home.

“Are you sure? Because from where I’m standing, it seems like you have a death wish.” Hasan snapped, coming closer to the bed. In an effort to avoid his glare, I looked around the room, realizing I was on his island, in his mansion, and particularly, the room he had specifically designed for me.

It’s been a long time since I’ve been here...

“Do you have a death wish, Jacky?” he asked, sitting at the edge of the bed. His voice was gentler now, but I still was scared to look at him.

“No,” I answered, glad I still could answer it honestly. Sometimes, I wondered if I was trying to get myself killed. Everyone made me feel like that was what I must be doing.

“Then I’ll tell the staff you’re here to stay.” He sounded pleased, but I felt a well of terror fill me, knowing that wasn’t the right outcome of this conversation. “It’ll be good to have you home.”

“No. This isn’t my home, Hasan. My home is in Texas with?—”

“Don’t say?—”

“With Heath and Carey. With Landon. Dirk. Niko. My home is?—”

“That place is going to kill you!” he snarled. “When are you going to realize that?”

When are you going to figure out how dangerous that place is? Your fascination with the werewolves is going to get you killed. You know it.”

“I don’t believe that,” I said, wishing I had more strength in the argument. It was true, but it was weak.

“Heath is being targeted by his own kind for being a rogue. You are being targeted by other werewolves. Both of you have pissed off witches around the world. You don’t have the skills, resources, or manpower to handle that level of threat, Jacqueline. You need to accept that.”

“We’ll figure it out,” I said, trying to get out of bed. My legs screamed in pain, and I started to fall, only for Hasan to catch me. He lifted me with ease and put me back in the blasted bed.

“You can’t be moving around yet,” he whispered gently, pushing hair from my face. “You have a broken leg, and the other calf muscle is torn to shreds. You were someone’s chew toy.”

“I don’t want to stay here forever, Hasan. This isn’t my home.”

“It can be while you heal,” he said, pulling the blankets over my legs again. “At least give me that. We can talk about the rest later.”

“I’ll heal faster in my own bed?—”

“This is your bed,” he said, smiling. “This is your room. I keep a room for all of you when you need a place to hide and recover. Stay, Jacky. Just until you’ve healed. We’ll talk about the rest later.”

Catch flies with honey...

Hasan was a master of it at that moment. I wanted to fight, but I couldn't get up and leave. I could rest, heal, and continue the fight to go home later. It was nice, really, having someone who was willing to take me in like this. To just care for and love me as a daughter. His expression was gentle, his eyes brown, the natural color I saw so rarely. My biological father had never given me such a loving look, but Hasan had loved me as a daughter from the first day. Even his flaws and the fights we had were rooted in that promise he made as a father to a woman he saw as his daughter.

"Okay. We'll talk about it later... once I can walk," I said, patting his hand and trying to shoo him from tucking me in further. "I can handle this. You can go get to work. Please. Stop babying me. It's getting embarrassing."

"All of you are the same. You grow up and stop letting me dote." He let me take the blankets, and I made sure my feet wouldn't get cold without his help. He looked back once, a loving smile on his face, before he walked out and closed my bedroom door.

And locked it.

He didn't...

I should have seen that coming.

Fuck you, Hasan.

With a growl, I knew that the door was reinforced. Hasan had his house built to handle as much as possible from his werecat family. It couldn't stop him or Jabari, Zuri, the other of the eldest members in the family, but it was very good at stopping me .

Oh, it's childproof. That's what it is. It's good enough to stop young werecats from breaking the house while we learn to control our strength.

Because he still thinks of me as a child.

Knowing I couldn't walk, all I could do was wait. It was better to let some healing happen before I tried to find my way out of here. It wasn't going to make him unlock the door faster. I had a window I could use, but that didn't matter if my legs didn't work.

Days passed. I slept and ate food when he brought it, not allowing anyone else to bring me anything. He read me books, leaving some for me to read in my own time. I could hear my siblings laughing as they ran around his mansion, all of them on their own family vacations, but no one visited me. They went to the beach together, drank, and did karaoke. It was lovely, but I couldn't join in. As for Hasan, I kept my guard up with him, always reminding him of the same thing when he came to check on me.

"I'm really grateful for this, but I will go back home when I'm done healing, Hasan," I said over and over.

"We'll talk about it when you've healed," he would reply, smile lines forming around his eyes as he patted my thigh, shoulder, or head before he left.

The days ticked by. I checked on the healing progress every day. When he wasn't around, I would test my strength on my feet, the early days being a huge struggle. Eventually, I could hold my own weight. I was shaky, but it was enough. I didn't go for the window, not immediately. Hasan deserved a chance to see me off.

He walked in, a tray of food in his hands, and saw me standing next to the bed, a fresh set of clothing on. He kicked the door closed behind him without saying anything.

"I'm ready to head out now," I said with a smile. "Isn't this great? My legs healed. Everything is healed, actually, but the legs were the real problem."

“I’m glad to see you moving around,” he said carefully, putting the tray down. “But are you certain you don’t want to stay? Hasn’t it been nice here, away from all the problems off the island? No werewolves in your space, no witches looking to take over the continent, no werecats wanting to berate you for making the wrong choices about ruling them...”

“It’s been nice, but I miss the home I built. I miss my land, my territory...” I rubbed my hands together, wanting to say the last piece. “I miss Heath and the family I have with him.”

“And what family is that?” Hasan asked coolly. “Single father with two children, one who hates practically everything and is an active danger to you, and the other is a mortal who might get killed by everything going on around you and him? That family?”

“Landon doesn’t... hate everyone and everything like that. He doesn’t,” I whispered, shaking my head.

“No response about Carey?”

“I won’t let anything happen to her,” I said, swallowing the overwhelming fear at even the idea. A world without her was a world I couldn’t begin to fathom, a world I didn’t want to consider. The concept brought the telltale signs of potential tears.

“I’m sure Heath has been trying to tell himself that since the day she was born. Look at how far it’s gotten him.”

“Stop this, Hasan. It’s mean,” I said, rubbing my eyes to try to stop even the slightest hint of tears. “We can make this work. We have been for a few years now. We can do this.”

“You will get killed or get one of them killed. I wouldn’t miss the werewolves, but Carey deserves a safer existence.”

“I know,” I murmured but shook my head at the same time. I needed to go home. I couldn’t stay here. I couldn’t let myself be wrapped in bubble wrap and kept on the shelf as the perfect, safe daughter who didn’t have a life, who left behind her love, and gave up on what she believed in.

I couldn’t live that existence. If I could, I would have picked it while I was still human.

“Then why are you fighting with me?”

“Because it’s not me! This isn’t me!” I cried out, pointing at my chest, hoping he would understand. “And it never will be.”

His eyes were hard as he approached.

“You don’t know that until you try,” he growled.

“I don’t need to try. The idea is just that unappealing. I know it won’t make me happy,” I said, continuing to shake my head as I stepped back from him. “Hasan, let me leave.”

“No,” he growled.

“Then I’ll reach out to the rest of the family to get me out of here,” I said, accepting that it was the only way. Zuri and Jabari would get me out. Niko could try. Subira... she definitely would.

“You wouldn’t dare ,” Hasan snarled.

I went to the window and pushed it open. They would make him understand.

“You would betray me, the only loving father you’ve ever had, for those fucking werewolves?”

That hit the mark. I knew I was going to give up something I wanted for my entire life if I finished climbing out the window.

I went out and fell into the courtyard. Subira was there and saw me, her eyes wide. My siblings ran out, some on Hasan’s side as he landed behind me and some with her.

“What on earth is happening?” Subira asked, her voice not carrying the power it normally had.

“She’s trying to run off to those werewolves to get herself killed! Subira, make her realize she’s going to break this family! Look at this. Now, she has us fighting against each other!”

I didn’t hear any responses. Battle lines were drawn, and I was in the middle, but the fight never broke out. The ground shook, and a crack appeared underneath me. Before I could get away from it, the world split in half, and I fell into the darkness.

Those words echoed in my mind — she’s going to break this family .

I’m always breaking families, aren’t I?

Every single family I’ve ever been in.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

I landed in the dark, thumping hard against the ground. I had to get up, but I wasn't sure what was up or down. Everything was so dark. I was lost.

I won't get anywhere if I don't try... but I'm so tired. I'm so fucking tired.

I laid there for some time, just trying to get my energy back but it never came. Eventually, no matter how tired I was feeling, I knew I had to move. I fought to sit up, my back aching once again. My head hurt, pounding with a fierce headache.

I was alone. So terribly alone.

I thought of what I had just lost. Another family. Like a painting, it appeared before me, watercolors in the dark.

"Look at what you lost now," my voice said to me, but not mine.

With a swallow, I turned to see Gwen, so human, fifteen years older than I looked. Everything I could have been if I had never been a werecat.

"What do you want, Gwen?" I asked, not getting to my feet. I sat on the dark ground, turning back to the watercolor of my werecat family arguing. The scene wasn't the one I had just left, though. It was Germany, Niko's home, that he would have to give up. Subira stood against Hasan, a man bleeding, as my siblings chose their sides or

stayed down, not wanting to get involved. They had been a perfectly fine family before me. Not perfectly happy, but okay.

I was the one who brought everyone to that point, standing with Dirk and Landon to protect them, to fight for them. To fight for my life with Heath.

I turned to look at a new watercolor image forming next to it. Another failure. Another broken family I couldn't fix. A friend I couldn't save. None of this would have happened if I hadn't taken Fenris in. None of it would have happened if I could have noticed something was deeply wrong with him and helped him. If I could have saved him from himself, no one would have gotten so angry at each other.

"You really are a walking disaster," Gwen said, exasperated, annoyed, and all too right.

"I just want to go back to Heath," I said, pulling my knees to my chest.

"Really? You broke our family... Well, you tried to. You have been the bane of the werecat ruling family since the day they met you... Do you really think a third family is actually giving you a chance? Do you not remember something so important about how you even joined that family?"

"Please, Gwen, don't..."

"You killed his son!" Gwen yelled at me, and that scene played out. Richard and me, fighting over Carey. "That's what you do, Jacky. You don't save anyone. You just end up hurting people."

If we had known there was magic involved, we could have saved him, too...

"Why should he want you back? He finally got to see one son get married, but he'll

never get to see the other, thanks to you .”

“Stop, Gwen. Please.”

“I bet every day Heath wakes up wishing he had me over you, someone more put together, who can manage money and business with a successful career and a shred of experience being a real mother. I bet Hasan does, too, wondering why he got the disastrous daughter instead of the one who actually saves lives,” Gwen hissed in her ear. “Just like our parents always were grateful for me while you were always giving them trouble.”

“You just didn’t care about them,” I said, shaking my head. “You were grateful for the attention and didn’t care about how Dad was treating Mom.”

“I didn’t want to see our family get broken. You did,” Gwen snapped. “From the beginning, even when you were little, you wanted to see the family break up. I never understood why you couldn’t just keep your mouth shut about it. It was like you wanted us to grow up the children of divorced parents.”

“Dad was cheating on her with her best friend! We were taught that was wrong! That people didn’t do that to each other! I was doing what I was told was right!” I screamed, holding my head as Gwen railed against me.

It was everything I had said to myself privately for decades—never good enough, never right enough. I was the one who broke everything, then I was confused why they hated me. Of course, I was. Every time.

“Why can’t you just mind your own business?” Gwen demanded. “It’s easier if you did that. You always make things a bigger problem than they need to be. You can’t just get with the program. You couldn’t even come help me, your own twin, without making it a bigger problem than it needed to be.”

“You didn’t understand what was at stake.”

“I was your twin! I’m more important than the rest of them. Why do other twins have someone who will stick with them through everything?—”

“I did that for you!” I was shaking, unable to handle the abuse, every word cutting deeply into my soul. Every small whisper over the years was coming home for me now. “You never did it for me!”

“Maybe you shouldn’t have tried to ruin our family, then,” Gwen whispered, the malice in her tone like a poison. “But that’s just a bad habit for you. You do it to everyone.”

“No, I don’t!” I cried out. Tears were falling now.

“You don’t even save anyone. I do it every day. I tried to be like you once, and look at what it did to everything. Your way doesn’t work. You couldn’t save your lover’s own children... either of them. The daughter or the son. She got taken from you and will live with that trauma for the rest of her life. You killed him. And your friend... Well, you weren’t paying enough attention, and you know it. It led to even more destruction.”

“Please stop...”

“You’re useless to your family. They sent you out to waste your time, knowing you can’t help them at all with solving that boy’s death. Well, we all know who killed him, don’t we? Couldn’t even tell it was a teenager. You just killed him.”

I was falling apart. It was like every nightmare I had since I was a child was playing out at the same time. Every deep, dark, depressing thought. I couldn’t breathe.

“It would be easier if you weren’t in everyone’s way anymore. Maybe then they could move forward, and no one else would get hurt,” Gwen whispered, so gently, her hand rubbing my head. “Lie down and stop fighting, Jacky. Stop fighting because it only hurts everyone around you.”

I started to slip, wondering how nice and comfortable it would be to just go to sleep. Gwen sat next to me, rubbing my hair.

“I’m sorry that the truth hurts so much,” she said. “I am. It’s hard to have to face these things, isn’t it? We both know it’s the truth, though. Look, there’s reality.”

I kept my eyes open to see the gold eyes light up in the darkness.

“A monster. You are what you are. You and the curse were made for each other. What did your new mother say? It was a woman who cursed her brothers. Another broken family, huh? That’s what the curse is, isn’t it?”

The gold eyes were distant, but I could feel the ground shake with each step the cat drew closer. Every slow step.

“It is,” I agreed softly, understanding that fundamental thing. Subira had explained it to me in the very Subira way she did everything. An ancient witch had looked at the moon and turned her brothers into monsters. Those two brothers made the rest of them. A broken family. Cursed to be broken. Cursed to break new families.

“I know you want so badly for you and Heath to make a new family, but it’s never going to happen. It can’t happen. You’re on the wrong side of things, and even if you weren’t... you don’t know how to have a happy family, Jacky. You never have.” Gwen was so gentle, so kind, and calm that I knew she wasn’t lying to me.

I didn’t know how. I had never really had one. Every minute I’d ever enjoyed of

almost happy was just waiting for the next shoe to drop. Always waiting for the next moment I would have it all ripped away from me. Parents who didn't accept me, siblings who despised me for ruining the happiness of the home, and one day, if I was lucky or unlucky, children who would blame me for all their troubles.

The cat drew closer, the gold eyes growing larger in the darkness as the watercolor paintings of my memories slowly faded, turning black and grey, no longer my problem. Just a history I was ready to forget now.

"It's sad to watch you fight the losing battle, Jacky... If your five-thousand-year-old parents couldn't bring peace and unity between the cursed, what really makes you think you can? You and I both know you aren't that arrogant. You're stubborn, but even you have to see reason at some point. They couldn't even keep all of their own children alive. How do you expect to succeed where they failed?"

The cat drew closer and closer. Eventually, I could see it in all its detail. The gold eyes were mine. The tawny form with some light spotting and striping very faint on the coat. The massive paws, the claws it kept extending and retracting.

The fangs, several inches longer, going below its bottom jaw, the sign of every werecat.

A beast made for killing, a predator that destroyed no matter what else it wanted.

A curse.

"That's you. There you are. You just need to accept you for what and who you really are, Jacky. You'll be happier if you just play the role assigned to you and stop fighting the inevitable. You know what's coming for you. Every moon cursed does, don't they?"

The werecat growled and started to shift and morph into the vision of a creature I had once seen in the flesh.

Bipedal, monstrous, and the end of all the cursed.

It entered the Last Change.

And it kept approaching.

I knew if I just closed my eyes, it would devour me, and all the pain would end. I wouldn't have to keep fighting the inevitable, as Gwen said. It would just be over. No more hoping for a family that loved me, just acceptance of the truth. No more ruining others lives while trying to help them. No more being disregarded.

Just me in my rawest form.

"That's enough!" a voice boomed in the dark.

A thunderclap made me jump up, trying to find out what was happening. Gwen was standing next to me, glaring in a direction. The werecat growled viciously in the direction of the echoing voice.

"I guess your second chance at having a mother has decided she wants to say something to you," Gwen said, smiling cruelly as she spoke, the rage in her eyes not leaving. "Can't wait to see how you finally disappoint her. Or you can just accept your truth right now, Jacky, and leave the hope and pain of what is to come behind before the cycle can start again. You know how it ends."

Subira walked through the dark, growing closer. I looked at her, then Gwen, then the werecat, before resting my eyes back on her.

Did I want to do this again? Did I want to disappoint her? Did I want to look in the eyes of yet another person I craved love and affection from only to see disappointment and anger? Could I handle that all over again?

“I said that’s enough, Jacky!” She lifted her staff and brought it down, another thunderclap, but this time, it felt like it made a direct impact with my head, blasting me to the ground. It was a painful landing, sending me skidding on the ground for several feet, leaving me separate from her, Gwen, and the werecat.

Ringing in my ears, I pushed myself back up and got to my feet, knowing everything had just changed. The scene in front of me hadn’t, with Subira, Gwen, and the werecat, but something was different.

Me.

I remembered everything.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

HEATH

Heath prowled around for twenty-four hours, hoping for Subira to bring him word about Jacky, but she had gone to sleep, doing something none of them understood. He received reports from Dirk and Niko about how Olivia had healed his fiancé, using Subira's blood to power the delicate process. While Subira was doing something only she understood, he was grateful there was some progress thanks to Olivia, the witch he couldn't do anything about. He didn't want to trust the witch, but with Dirk standing in his way, he just had to let it be. Subira's immediate trust in Olivia was a good sign.

After talking to Landon about what they were facing, he and Landon had intentionally slowed everything down. With Teagan, Shamus, and Ranger all proven to them, along with the younger members Arlo, Benjamin, Stacy, and Kody, they had most of the pack.

It left four options. He hated all of those options.

Roselyn, Piper, Jenny, and Carlos.

Ranger was digging into their accounts, trying to find transactions, emails, secret accounts, anything to give them a clue which one it was.

I want all of it, not just the confession from whichever one is going to disappoint me. I need all of it.

Landon was looking around their homes. Fenris had secrets in his home, and there was no reason to think the traitor wouldn't have the same.

Heath prowled, knowing he wasn't in the right headspace to calmly look through things without potentially destroying the very evidence he hoped to find.

He paced as he plotted his future moves, knowing there were decisions only he could make. Not Landon, not any of the pack, not any of Jacky's family. Only him. There was something important only he could do, but it required steps, and each one was going to be harder than the previous.

With everyone working on their parts, it's time for me to get my part started.

He made a call on Jacky's computer, using her account to reach out to the only person who could get him where he needed to be when he needed to be there.

"Everson," Hasan greeted.

"Hasan." Heath looked up to see the tired gold eyes of the Tribunal member, patriarch of Jacky's family. Subira's mate. The father of some of the most dangerous individuals in the world. He himself was in the top ten of those types of supernaturals.

There wasn't a werewolf in the world who wasn't afraid of this type of conversation.

"I know what's happened," Hasan said before Heath could find a way to start the conversation. "I... can't tell you anything. I can only pass along information that can help Jacky, and that can only go to my family members."

Heath caught the hesitation, wondering if Hasan did want to tell him and regretted being unable to.

Surely not. He hates me with his daughter. He wouldn't want to help me with much of anything. I know this call is a gamble just for that alone.

"I have no contact with the Tribunal outside of you. I'm not calling as your daughter's lover. I'm calling as a supernatural needing to speak with our ruling government," Heath explained, dancing around the issue of their connection through Jacky into the political space he knew Hasan thrived in.

"Oh?" Hasan tilted his head to the side, everything about his expression changing into something more cunning and calculated as he seemed to take in everything Heath was and could ever be. There was something haunting about those gold eyes in Hasan's face and not Jacky's. He wondered how Subira handled it, knowing they shared such an exact match.

"I need an appointment with the Tribunal as a whole in twenty-four hours. That is my formal request."

"I can make that happen without getting into trouble..." Hasan sighed. "For better or for worse, I need to know why you want this appointment."

"I plan to challenge Callahan for his position as the Tribunal Alpha." Heath was giving himself a deadline. He wanted to wait for Jacky to wake up. Truly, that was all he needed to find some semblance of peace and control.

But Callahan needed to be challenged. Heath needed to make sure nothing like this could ever happen again. It didn't even have to be Callahan, though Heath was certain it was. He needed to do this no matter what.

“He could kill you,” Hasan said softly, leaning back in his chair.

“I could kill him,” Heath retorted. “Either way, it needs to happen. You aren’t allowed to meddle in the affairs of werewolves, but you still have a duty as a member of the Tribunal to facilitate the meetings of supernaturals who approach you. You can’t protect him nor hide him from me. If you can’t reasonably involve yourself and schedule this meeting, you need to give me the contact with another on the Tribunal who can.”

“Protect him?” Hasan raised an eyebrow. “Hide him?” Hasan looked like he was about to laugh. “What makes you think I would ever do that?”

“He’s a member of the Tribunal and stable leadership is important to the Tribunal. Neither moon-cursed species has ever seen a change in that leadership.”

“Fair, but consider for a moment that I don’t care,” Hasan said, spreading his hands. “I don’t care which wolf sits in those seats. I don’t care what’s going on with the packs and the loners. I don’t care. You wolves will do what you wolves do best. Adjust and figure out your ranks on your own. You always have. You always will.”

“That’s it? You’ll just schedule this and let me go through with it?”

“There’s no reason I can think to stop you. I hope you’ve thought this through.” Hasan drummed his fingers on the desk, considering something, his expression thoughtful. Finally, something was decided. “How is she?”

Heath rocked back, surprised by the sudden question.

“Subira is with her now, but... she seems to have just fallen asleep and not woken back up, either,” Heath explained. “Niko is with both of them upstairs. Dirk found a witch he and Jacky met, who has training as a healer, to help with Jacky’s injuries.

She's been able to heal all of them so far, thanks to Subira."

"Did she give the young witch blood to help?"

When Heath nodded, Hasan sighed.

"That's my mate. She must like the witch. That's a good sign."

"How did you know she was young?" Heath dared to ask.

"They're all young." It seemed like such a simple answer to the ancient werecat. "As for Subira sleeping..." Hasan's gold eyes looked away, seeming to focus on something far beyond the screen. "You just have to trust her."

"I do..." Heath said, but he was still unable to settle on the idea that Jacky would be okay. He couldn't live with an assurance. He couldn't tell this werecat that, though. His mate was the one helping Jacky. It would look badly on Heath to question Subira's abilities to Hasan. He knew Hasan would catch the disbelieving tone he couldn't stop, but Hasan didn't point it out, the same way Heath hadn't pointed out Hasan's hesitation earlier in the conversation.

"Someone will let you know when the door is ready. Twenty-four hours. See you then." Hasan hung up on him.

With that, Heath checked his phone. The wedding had been on Sunday. Subira arrived on Monday morning. It was now Tuesday morning.

Wednesday morning... I'm either going to be the most powerful male Alpha werewolf in the world, or I'm going to be dead.

It wasn't the first time he'd faced the odds and come out on top. He'd fought a

gauntlet to kill six strong werewolves back-to-back to keep Landon alive. He'd walked away from those fights as the new Alpha of the Dallas pack.

He checked his watch, smiling as he saw the time.

He had a meeting with his werewolves. It was time to do the rest.

Every instinct in Heath told him to move this faster. He walked slowly out of the home Jacky shared with him and his family, touching the door frame as he considered how it was possibly his last day in it. He wished he could make the most of it.

Justice for her will have to be enough of a goodbye if I don't come back.

He walked to Kick Shot, shut down for the entire week thanks to the events of Sunday. Half the staff had quit, and there were lawyers calling them about it. Heath refused to talk to the BSA, telling them he would be available on Friday to discuss it.

Everyone was moving on his schedule. Except Subira and Jacky.

Werecats don't move on anyone's schedule but their own. This is what I get for falling in love with one of them. One little piece of my life I truly have no control over.

He found it charming from the werecats, especially Jacky, even if it made him feel like he was going to have a heart attack.

He was grateful he had more control over the werewolves. Nearly perfect control. Whoever betrayed him and Jacky had found loopholes or had something that would give them a reason to fight his long-standing orders of loyalty. He didn't like taking away a werewolf's free will, finding it difficult to maintain. It could be cruel. He'd seen other werewolves do it. It was all too easy for an Alpha to become a dictator,

robbing someone of even the power to speak up for what they needed. Heath knew all too well that if he ordered a werewolf to starve to death, there were many who wouldn't be able to fight that order.

He'd been lax. He'd hoped and believed in his werewolves. That hadn't been entirely misplaced. Most of his pack had remained loyal.

However, most wasn't all. It hadn't been perfect. After everything Jacky had sacrificed for them, at least one of them had betrayed him and her. He'd been able to reconcile what happened with Fenris. He'd always been as mad as a hatter, and knowing there was fae magic and a relationship with another werecat only added to the problem of tenuous sanity. Those secrets had been kept from everyone, even him, who had known Fenris for years. Through all of that, the best reason he had been able to reconcile that was because Fenris wasn't the one who betrayed the pack. Rainer hadn't been a member of his pack. Hadn't been Jacky's friend.

Whoever betrayed them was. He knew this wasn't going to be a case like Fenris and Rainer. They had betrayed the pack for entirely selfish reasons after everything she had done for them.

He had to fight the urge not to punish all of them with the sort of control and domination that went against his morals. Landon would kill him for it, but that wasn't enough of a threat to stop him. Landon wasn't one to like packs and other werewolves, but Heath knew Landon would hate him even more if he did it.

What really stopped him, though, was the woman who couldn't speak up for these werewolves. Jacky would never look at him the same. He wouldn't be the man she fell in love with. If she lived, that was really important to him. No matter how much the urge came to him, he just had to think of her and know she would hate him for it. It was the best protection he had from losing himself to this.

He walked into Kick Shot, continuing to take his time. He found Landon, Shamus, and Ranger sitting together, each of them with everything they needed to present to him.

“How is everyone today?” he asked, sitting down with them, his tone cool, but not because he was upset with any of them anymore.

“We have a lot,” Landon said, pushing forward the first file. “Ranger reviewed the footage. There are two places of note where someone might have tampered with either the bottle of bourbon or Jacky’s glass.”

“Which two?” he asked, pulling the first file closer and flipping it open to see the printed frames.

“Roselyn and Jenny,” Ranger said, clearing his throat. “Roselyn with the bottle of bourbon. Jenny with both the glass and the bottle.”

I still can’t take one of the couples out of the equation, then.

“Jenny’s is more suspicious. Neither are caught by the cameras pouring anything in, but she was there longer, and there are some strange movements.” Ranger reached out slowly, but Heath didn’t need him. He flipped the pictures on his own, seeing the chain of events of how Jenny messed with practically everything on the table, pretending to clean it up while there was no staff around. Everyone was dancing and laughing, no one looking her way, not for long.

“I see,” Heath said, knowing with all the movement and what Jenny had worn, it would be too easy for her to sneak whatever she needed into the bottle of bourbon. “She’s good.”

“She is,” Ranger agreed.

“I want the rest,” Heath said softly, closing the pictures.

Jenny... Oh, I know what Callahan would have promised you...

“I couldn’t find anything suspicious in either home. Jenny, though, has a fire pit in the back,” Landon said. “And her neighbors said she likes going out to grill hotdogs and shit regularly.”

“You talked to the neighbors?” Heath was surprised his son would go that far.

“Neighbors are human and know they live next to a werewolf. They’re all too willing to pay too much attention in case the monster next door does something they might find strange. Roselyn and Piper have no notes from their neighbors except for the fact that everyone was almost disbelieving that they couldn’t think of anything to say about the couple. They know how to stay out of sight and out of mind for the humans near them, just like they are supposed to.”

“Good job. Carlos?”

“Nothing about Carlos from his and Jenny’s neighbors. Only her.” Landon snorted. “She’s good, but not that good. No idea if he’s involved or not.”

“Shamus, how have they been acting in their cells?”

“They all have a reasonable amount of fear. None of them are acting guilty, not even her. They’re all waiting like we did while you were clearing us. They know they are the last options, that one of them is a traitor. They haven’t spoken, but the distrustful looks have been thrown around by all of them but Carlos.”

“I hope he’s not involved,” Landon said softly.

“Agreed.” He couldn’t put it on Carlos. It would be real madness if Carlos had done this. “Bring me Roselyn first,” Heath ordered.

Shamus went to get her. Landon and Ranger moved to another table. Heath kept the printed pictures from the security cameras, ready to show them to Roselyn.

When Roselyn was sitting in front of him, Heath smiled, opened the file, and pushed it to her.

“Explain,” he ordered, letting the power roll through him.

“I really wanted to get a taste, but I thought better of it. I like bourbon, a lot, and I’ve never seen a vintage that old, much less had it accessible to try. It was very childish of me, but my mood was good from the party, and no one was looking, so I could be sneaky about it. Everyone else had been going and touching the bottle a little to read it. I knew my scent would be covered.”

“You didn’t place anything in it?”

“Of course not, Alpha.” Roselyn’s nostrils flared in insult. “I know I’m one of the last werewolves you think might have done it, but I will die before I betray you or anyone else in this pack.”

All the truth.

“Go upstairs. We’ll do Piper and let you both join the ranks.”

Roselyn stood up slowly, wary, just in case. She was a smart woman.

“Thoughts?” he asked.

“Carlos wouldn’t do this either,” she murmured. “He’s quiet and broken and?—”

“I know,” Heath whispered coldly, making his thoughts clear about what that meant.

“Yes, Alpha, of course.” She bowed her head fast and walked out.

He cleared Piper quickly enough, sending her and Roselyn home. He didn’t give them a status update on Jacky but caught Landon texting a second later. He showed Heath his phone before he sent that update.

“We don’t need to interview Jenny or Carlos right now,” Heath said, leaning back in his seat.

“We could be done, though?—”

“I want her to sweat more,” Heath said with a smile that held no joy or mirth. “She knows we know. With just the two of them left, I want to see if she’s willing to admit it to him . I want to see if she’s willing to destroy herself before I am forced to tomorrow morning. She’s going to the Tribunal with me.”

Landon’s eyes went wide. Ranger and Shamus were beyond shock, horrified by what Heath had just said.

“Landon, I’ll need you as my second. A challenge has been issued. You’ll probably be talking to Corissa. She’s his mate. She’s allowed to stand as his second if he doesn’t want to bring his second from his proper pack.”

“So, you’re going to do it. You’re actually challenging Callahan for the Tribunal spot,” Landon said, seeming excited and afraid. His son loved a good fight, but this was going to be one of the hardest Heath had ever faced.

“I already have.”

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 9:36 am

Subira walked past Gwen and the werecat, heading directly for me, her staff striking the ground every time she took a step, using it as a walking stick as she often did. Her eyes were that of a cat, with the pupils slit as she narrowed them to inspect me.

“You don’t have the injuries I saw on your body. That’s good. That little witch must be working fast to help you with my power feeding her, and that healed you here.” She touched my chest with the staff. “How do you feel here?”

“I... I don’t know how I got here or really what’s going on. I remember everything now, but...”

“Ah. You remember drinking Heath’s bourbon, at least, yes?” Subira tapped the staff against my chest again.

“Yeah. I fell. I woke up, and I was with...” Just saying his name hurt now because I could also remember the flicker of hope that he had been alive and that I had imagined his real death. “I was with Fenris. After a little while, we were chased by Rainer as a Last Change werewolf. Rainer took Fenris over a cliff, but then I went down it and was in my human parents’ house when I was in college...” I rubbed my forehead. I remembered all of it, but it didn’t make any sense. “None of what happened is real. Rainer and Fenris were the same person. I didn’t catch my dad cheating in college. The fight between you and Hasan happened in Germany, not on his island...”

“Let me give you the quick version of what you need to know. Callahan bribed a member of Everson’s pack to poison him. Heath. To poison your lover, the Alpha. You see, Callahan and Corissa have been having a hard time getting unruly packs in

line to deal with the threat of the witches, whether it be to cut off their business with them or help search for missing werewolves. It doesn't matter. They need that control. We all do."

"And Heath is the rogue Alpha the other packs look to, to disrespect Callahan," I said, closing my eyes as I realized how easy that would be to figure out. "If the Tribunal Alphas can't handle a simple rogue, they can't handle anyone."

"Exactly. Now, Callahan and Corissa warned Hasan without names that they had to do something. This came with unspoken but very real promises that you wouldn't be hurt." Subira leaned on her staff. "Yet here we are. You accidentally ingested the fae poison, not Heath."

"Oh, no," I said, putting my hands over my face. Was this my fault, too? Part of me believed it was better I went through this than him, but it led to so many other problems that it was me. It was a mess for everyone now.

"You don't seem angry that Callahan and Corissa would do this," Subira pointed out.

"I hate it, but I understand it," I said into my hands. "We've killed werecats who went against us. I would be a hypocrite for allowing myself to fight for the rule of this family but ask the werewolves not to do the same for theirs."

"I'm glad you and I are on the same page." Subira reached out and pulled one of my hands from my face. "Now, let me tell you one thing that Callahan didn't mess up about this."

"I would love to hear it."

"This poison isn't intended to be fatal," she said with a smile.

I blinked several times, trying to understand that.

Not intended to be fatal...

Poison...

For Heath...

From Callahan...

Not intended to be fatal?

“What?” I finally said, eyes wide as my other hand dropped to my side.

“Hasan asked Alvina about some fae things that could cause this. He had a feeling Callahan wouldn’t go to the witches about a way to get rid of Everson that wouldn’t expose the werewolves to more problems from witches. We still don’t really know if those two are trustworthy, you see. He went to Alvina because he and Brion had their falling out over Brion’s recent behavior.”

“Brion is a piece of shit,” I said, nodding.

“It’s fae in origin. It’s used to test soldiers and knights and other such warriors to see if they are as strong of heart as they are of body. It makes the drinker live through their darkest thoughts, worst nightmares, and they have to get through them. They have to confront and move past them to prove themselves,” Subira said, turning away from me. “However, when the fae drink it, they know what they are getting into. They have to fight the loss of memory, keep their bearings, and so forth. It’s part of the test. If they lose themselves to the nightmares and personal demons, they will eventually fade and die. They go in knowing the risk, though.”

“And I didn’t. I couldn’t even smell anything was wrong.”

“No, you didn’t, and you were at a party where you wouldn’t have thought to pay attention to your nose well enough. No one is going to fault you for letting your guard down at Dirk and Landon’s wedding reception.” She patted my cheek. “We’ve all done it. There’s not a single person in the family who can fault you...and if they try, I’ll get some of it and make them live through this nightmare of their own making.”

There was a light pettiness to her words that should have made them funny, but I wasn’t laughing because I knew her threat was a real one.

“Okay, so how are you here? And where do I go to get the fuck out of this?”

“I decided to join you by entering your mind with mine. I am sleeping beside you right now in the waking world. I had to find you in here, but I have now, right on time, it seems.” Subira sighed, looking at the two watching us. Gwen was furious at what was unfolding, but the werecat was very slowly slinking away. “I can’t dispel the entire poison. I have tried several times. I also don’t have enough control to get you to the places you need to be. We have to explore your mind together to find out. I can tell you a couple of helpful hints.”

“I’m more than ready to have some of those.” I would take anything.

“She is not real. She’s a manifestation of your negative thoughts.” Subira pointed her staff at Gwen first. “A mean one at that. You and I should talk about the things she was telling you because you must have told them all to yourself at some point. Second...” Subira changed the angle of her staff to the werecat, who growled at her.

“That’s me?—”

“No, that’s the curse, and if you let it win, the people in the waking world will have

to run for their lives if they aren't strong enough to kill you," Subira said, power thundering in her words. Not a loud crack as it had been before, but the low rumble of a coming storm, still miles off but visible in the sky. "It looks like you because we're in your mind, but it is not you. It's not helping you; it's not ever going to save you from anything happening here. It doesn't want the fae magic to kill you. It wants to control you by letting you give up here and needs you too much."

"Oh..."

"We all have one," Subira said, lowering her staff. "But it can't take you by force. You have to either want its power in a moment of the fiercest rage or give in to its call out of hopelessness, but it will always be your choice."

"You got here right before I..."

"Yes, so it seems," Subira said, her words so flat, but even so, I could smell her sadness in the air.

"I'm sorry." The words weren't good enough, but they were all I had.

"Apologize to yourself, Jacky. You were the one driving yourself to it." She turned her back on the two manifestations of my mind, the twin and the curse, looking at me eye to eye. "Do you really think that you destroy families?"

"I..." I couldn't say yes. I couldn't say no. "Sometimes, I think about it. Not often. I try not to dwell on it. My human parents hate me. My twin doesn't care about me, and I... can't bring myself to care about her anymore, can't bring myself to try bridging that gap anymore. Something is broken with me for that to happen. Hasan... Mischa..." I wrung my hands together. "I am in love with a man, and I killed his son. He knows it."

“And you’re still not mates,” Gwen said cruelly, snide about how I couldn’t even have that with Heath. “Because who would ever be mates with the killer of their child?”

Subira’s eyes flash in rage, hearing Gwen’s voice, knowing it was just my thought coming from the other mouth.

“You know that’s unfair to do to yourself,” Subira snarled, glaring at me , not Gwen.

“I do. I do know. It’ll happen when it happens. I’m holding back on my side, too. There are things I’m... dealing with. I love that man more than anything. All I’ve wanted since this started was just to go home, go back to him, when I could remember home and him. Everything kept stopping me. When I thought I had found home, it ended up being the wrong one. Then I was attacked by a werewolf, and it really did damage to me. Then I woke up on the island, and Hasan made me sit there and heal and wouldn’t let me go home, either...” I shook my head in dismay, tears threatening. “That’s all I want, to see him again. He’s home. Him, Carey, Landon, Dirk... My home.”

“Then we know the exit,” Subira said gently, reaching up to wipe the tear that escaped my eye, her thumb brushing my cheek. “We’ll find out how to get you home.”

I could only nod.

“But first, we need to confront how you feel, the real memories. We need to find these things that haunt you, and you need to move through them. At the end of that, we’ll get you home.”

“I don’t remember one of them.” I knew which one would stop me. Fenris, I could find. I would never forget that. I could remember the fights with Hasan, thinking I

had broken my second family. I could find the boy and werewolves in Alaska. “I don’t remember causing the rift between me and my human parents.”

“Since it’s the one the farthest back, we have time to address that. We’ll start with the most recent. Take us back to the forest, Jacky. Let’s go find the boy you couldn’t save.”

I nodded, not knowing what to do, but I could remember those watercolor images of my memories that had shown up and gone black and white, fading entirely now. I thought of Alaska, thought of the house with the witches, the werewolves we had killed in the forest.

The image of my memory formed. Subira walked to it, nodding appreciatively, seeming satisfied. Then she held out a hand to me, and I took it, allowing her to walk us into it. We left behind Gwen but not the werecat. It didn’t go through the watercolor portal-type thing like us, but instead just walked into the memory on its own.

“Is it going to do that the entire time?” I asked, nodding toward it.

“Oh, yes. Just ignore it. That’s all you can do. Yours is far tamer than Hasan’s, thankfully. His takes a very particular shape that isn’t his own and represents far more than just the curse.”

“Can you tell me about that? Have you been in Hasan’s head like this?”

“You are the third member of the family I have ever done this to. Hasan... I have been allowed to rummage about in his head for thousands of years. Our mate bond makes it easy. I don’t even need to be on the same continent as him.”

That makes a lot of sense about why they are so willing to live apart. She and I can

touch, so I can only imagine... And I think I'll avoid that mental image.

Subira looked somewhat amused as I visibly had to shake myself to rid myself of understanding what her time in Hasan's head meant.

"The other was Jabari," she continued once I was done banishing other thoughts. "Where I found the spot in his head and soul that the mate bond drifted off him to nothing. It wasn't easy, but I was able to make it physical in this space. I then hopped to Aisha. For a split second, their minds brushed against each other. I also used his magic to make sure it was possible since it was harder than what I have to do here in a magical sense. This is harder in other ways."

"Oh. Did Jabari even realize you can do this?"

"If he did, he wouldn't be the one who is curious. He's reasonably wary of his own magic. He'll train it because I ask him, but he knows what the wrong witches can do and therefore has some hate for it all, like Hasan." Subira shrugged. "Part of that is my fault. Part of it is Hasan's. Part of it is his own experience."

"Hasan, who was nearly made a slave like..."

Remembering the boy, why we were in this moment, it all happened quickly. The actual fight played out before me, the giant Last Change werecat attempting to kill us.

"Tell me, Jacky... does that seem like a boy to you right now?"

"No," I answered honestly.

"Does that seem like someone you could have reasoned with?"

I shook my head.

“No.”

“Then why are you blaming yourself for not knowing those things?”

“Because I could have...”

Stop. Everyone has tried to tell me the same thing over and over again.

I watched it play out. It was literally an out-of-body experience in my own head. I had a new angle on a fight I had been right in the middle of.

I watched the struggle. Me biting and clawing. Niko with his silver claws. Dirk trying to get a good shot, trying to provide that fatal blow, just like me, just like Niko.

They weren't haunted like me. They weren't beating themselves up the same way.

“I hold myself to a high standard,” I explained, maybe for just myself to hear, maybe for Subira. “Impossibly high. I don't know why. I logically know that it wasn't my fault, but my heart doesn't want to accept that yet. I grieve for him, for whoever his parents may have been. I'll never stop grieving for that loss and knowing my part in it.”

“Was it your fault?”

“No,” I said, blinking back tears. “I did everything I could. I couldn't save him, though.” I didn't need Subira to say anything. I knew the truth. “I did save a lot of people who could have been hurt by him, whether it was by their control or if he got away from them. I do know I saved them. I...” I took a deep breath. “I saved him from their clutches. I hope he's at peace now.”

The memory washed away, leaving Subira and me to find a new place to go.

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“Good job,” Subira said, touching my back.

“It still hurts,” I admitted.

“It’s not about completely healing right now, Jacky. It’s about facing these moments that have threatened to destroy you with honesty and bravery. Alvina was very clear about that. This isn’t therapy. It’s a test. Things that haunt a person will always haunt you. You have to have the power to face them because only then can you overcome them.”

“Why did anyone think this was a good idea to do to someone?”

“They call it Oberon’s Test. Only having passed it can one serve as one of the most elite of their warriors, taking orders from their highest rulers to protect the fae, both the people and the land.”

“Tell Alvina this sucks,” I muttered, wiping my face off.

“I’m certain Hasan found a way to say that to her while she explained it to him,” Subira said, pursing her lips tightly, either fighting a smile or matching my annoyance. Both of those were possible from what I could smell in her scent.

“Which do you want to see first? Fenris or Hasan?” she asked, leaning on her staff.

“Fenris,” I answered immediately, and we were dropped into the Black Forest. I saw Landon and me fighting for our lives. Fenris, or Rainer, was in his Last Change, not entirely finished, but so close.

I started walking close, wanting to hear some very specific words.

“Jacky.” Subira didn’t sound pleased.

“Yeah?”

“What is wrong with you in this memory?” she asked, her words telling me she thought something was very wrong.

That was when I remembered. Landon had seen it this day, what I had learned to do. I looked at myself, the fighting frozen for me to inspect the memory, like I had wanted it to freeze, so it did.

I was a bit terrifying to look at. My incisors were grown out like they were a werecat’s fangs, going nearly to my jawline. My facial structure was slightly changed to account for the difference. My fingernails had become cat claws but weren’t retractable yet, it seemed.

“The witches in Dallas tried to force me to Change, to force me to fight for them. A werecat being a good addition to the werewolves they were planning on having from the Dallas pack. I fought it, and this happened. Since then...”

“You can just do that?” Subira growled.

“I saw another moon cursed do it before. In fact...” I turned to look at Fenris. “It was him.”

“The one you called the mad wolf?” She was snappy now, my mother. “Jacky, that is dangerous.”

“I know. That’s why I don’t want to tell Heath about it,” I said softly.

“And why, even though I can tell you both love each other enough, that you don’t have a mate bond. You are scared of telling Heath Everson about this.”

I nodded.

“Fair.” Subira shook her head as she closely inspected my frozen fighting form as well. “I certainly won’t be telling Hasan or your siblings about this. Who knows?”

“Landon,” I answered, swallowing as I pointed to the witness of this fight. “Only Landon, who is afraid of telling his father because Heath has had to put down Last Change werewolves before, and... he doesn’t want his father to think he needs to kill me, the woman he loves.”

“Oh, dear,” Subira said, leaning on her staff like she suddenly needed support. “Daughter, your life is more complicated than I had known.”

“Yeah.” I turned back to Fenris, then stepped back. “Let’s have this play out then. So long as you think I’m safe enough to be around.”

“Clearly, you are strong enough to hold control of your curse in a way I haven’t seen in some time. The fight with the witches you mentioned might have helped you unlock this dangerous trick, but you have worked and used it to master it. That is a testament to your own control. Just be careful, Jacky.” She nodded to something, and I knew it was the damn werecat following us. “It is always waiting for you to make the choice. Maybe that’s why it’s stalking you in that form and not the one we know more readily.”

“I fear it,” I admitted. “Becoming like Fenris, losing my mind and control. Every time I use it, I know I’m playing with fire. He didn’t know better in some ways. He had another issue, which was being the false identity created by fae magic to cover up for a murderous piece of shit, Rainer, who is actually the one fighting Landon and me

here.”

“You related to him in some odd ways, didn’t you?”

“Truthfully? Only that one. He was... always strange. He hated werecats. He attacked me the first time we met. He was the strangest friend I ever had... and I think I put too much on him. I thought if I could get him to live with me, to be my friend, there was no reason other werewolves or werecats couldn’t also heal and move on. Putting that on him was my fault.”

I kicked the ground as the fight continued. It had been bloody and brutal.

“I hadn’t known I had brought a ticking time bomb into my home, and I feel guilty for that. Rainer almost killed all four of us. Me and Landon stayed back for the last fight, knowing we could very well die. We had one sword and me, struggling to match the power of him. I didn’t have many options except to play with fire.”

“Do you miss him?”

“I do... but he was never real.”

The scene continued until we saw him die, and the wild hunt rode in and took him away.

“Hasan told me about them once,” Subira said, watching the hunt. “He’d stumbled on them a long time ago.”

“Huh. They recognized my gold eyes.”

“This was the same place he found Niko. Not this specific spot, but this forest. Whether they were actually riding that night Hasan saw them... I don’t know. I bet he

doesn't, either. But he saw them. He never thought they would play such a role in Niko's life, though. Niko was from this area, so we never thought much of him wanting to come back to it. I had never been here, never noticed just how much magic there was or understood how it was an overlap with the fae realms."

"Damn. Niko really kept secrets, huh?"

"He's not the only one," she said, turning to me with a flat look.

I smiled weakly before looking at the hunt as it left.

"Goodbye," I whispered.

But we weren't leaving yet. The werecat was lurking very close to us. It growled when I looked at it, daring me as it approached. I growled back, but it continued its approach.

"Stop," I hissed at it. "I'm not afraid of losing myself to you. I can control myself, and you won't catch me hopeless again."

"You can't banish it. It will always be there, Jacky. You can potentially create some distance from it, but with what you can do, I'm not sure that's feasible for you. It'll always be a close and lurking fear. It's not part of the rest of this. That's why it can follow us the way it is. It's the real horror of the curse, always there, always inside us, always waiting for us to fall."

"It can keep waiting, then." I tried to think of what was keeping us in this memory if it wasn't the werecat. "What is it? Why haven't we left?" I asked myself and Subira, hoping the conversation could help uncover what I was missing.

"I don't know. You're the only one who can figure out this answer. It could be

something new you might have stumbled on but didn't give enough thought. It could be old that you have thought you were away from but never properly addressed. This is your test, Jacky."

"This is frustrating. Of all the things Callahan and Corissa could think of, it was this stupid Oberon's Test. And, of course, they're a piece of this memory, too, you know? This was their long plan about getting Niko killed if a war between the werecats and werewolves ever started again." I growled in frustration. "They plot like Hasan or the fae. There's always something that these people have in the works, always waiting to plot against an enemy that might be real or might not."

"There is," Subira agreed.

"Like thinking they had to kill Heath to secure their power! How did Heath and I never really think about that? And we sent him to deal with stuff for our family. That was absolutely going to be noticed. Like this. I heard some weird things from Fenris. Callahan really wanted him back, and none of us thought there was something insane about that situation. Every day as a supernatural is insane, it feels like, so we didn't look deep enough."

The memory faded.

"Ha." I rolled my eyes. "Yeah, the guilt at missing something so fucking obvious when I look back."

"It's a hard lesson," Subira said, shrugging. "Because so many people miss it."

"That's not funny."

"None of this is funny, but I like to think that was a very well-done play on words," she said, a small smile forming. "I'm really proud of you for facing this as well as

you have so far. Tell me if your mind ever gets... fuzzy so I can stop it from messing with your memory.”

“Will do,” I said, nodding. So far, I felt good. Everything made sense in its way.

“Onto the next memory, then,” Subira said gently. “I imagine getting through these is harder when someone doesn’t have a witch keeping them clear of the poison’s effects that muddle your mind and cloud your thoughts.”

“Thank the gods for that.”

I thought of Germany again, and we went to Niko’s home.

I was dreading this.

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I followed myself into the large room where the family had decided to hold the meeting. Subira and I found a corner, watching together, her hand holding mine now.

“I know everything he said,” Subira said, squeezing my hand. “I know what happened before I arrived. I’m still sorry it had come to this.”

I could only nod as it started with Hasan snapping across the room at Dirk when he and Makalo were finally meeting in person. Even Subira flinched.

“I stripped his hide for that,” she said, her words tight and controlled but not well enough to stop me from knowing it made her furious. “He meant them at that exact moment. He regretted them later.”

“Does he understand how damaging that is to people?” I growled softly.

“Oh, yes. He understands. I won’t give you any excuses. I understand why he lashed out, but that understanding doesn’t fix the damage.”

“He really hurt Dirk,” I said, covering my mouth as I watched. Landon getting angry, then me stepping in. What really stuck out to me was the middle daughter of the family, Mischa.

“Why is she so mean?”

“She’s always been abrasive about certain things. Let’s be honest for a moment, Jacky. There are many ways she’s like you. She just defends something different. She was our first child after Zuri and Jabari. Compare her to me and Hasan, to your eldest

siblings. Does it look like she fits in?"

"No, she doesn't, if I only cared about skin deep part of family," I said honestly.

"Neither do I on that scale, though. Most of us don't."

"Imagine how a little girl will throw her life away for the family who saved her from being sold away by her blood parents," Subira said gently, touching my elbow.

"Imagine how someone who believes she owes everything to her father, the one who found her and decided to love her in the place of her first family, might be willing to ignore the man's flaws. Or defend him from any perceived threat, even if it's someone she is supposed to love as another member of the family."

"It's been thousands of years since she was a child," I pointed out.

"We immortals can be very stubborn people," Subira countered. "And for a long time, her unfailing loyalty to Hasan was a boon. She's trying to protect her father, just like you are trying to protect those young men. There's love between her and I. She's as much my daughter as you and Zuri, but she's much closer to Hasan. She goes to him for all the advice she needs in life. She looks to him to tell her she's done well or how to improve. Families have those relationships. I'm not jealous, nor do I love her less, but she doesn't want me in that role for her, so I never forced myself into it."

"Were you ever jealous, or have you always been wise and untouchable?" I asked dryly, as I considered how she could handle all this. She was ancient, but she also seemed perfect. Part of me almost disliked it.

"I was immensely jealous when she was young," Subira admitted softly. "All it did was damage my attempts to get closer to her. Eventually, we settled on what we have now. I'm her mother. I will hold her while she cries and talk to her about romantic partners, but I won't push into the spot where she has firmly placed Hasan. Just like Hasan doesn't push into the place I hold for Zuri."

“Ah. You started letting all of us decide who we were going to really lean on,” I said, still watching the family argument explode. Not literally. Not yet.

“Yes. We did... until you.” She leaned on her staff, the most casual thing she ever did. I was beginning to recognize it as a moment of humanity from her, needing something that wasn’t her own power to rest with. She carried it damn near everywhere, almost like a source of comfort.

“Hasan Changed me, so it was decided he was the parent I got to deal with.”

“I can be a lot,” Subira reminded me. She wasn’t wrong. If I had met Subira in the earliest years of being a werecat, I might have run and never looked back. She was other, different in ways I couldn’t have fathomed at that time, too inexperienced with magic and the supernatural. She would have terrified me.

But she was more to me now. She was the one who was here, for one, but it wasn’t just that. It was her quiet vulnerability, her fierce love that held nothing but honesty, her wisdom, and all the mystery that would have terrified me before. Now, I was drawn to her, needing her wisdom, wanting her opinion on things, wanting her to know me and to know her.

Things were coming to a head in the argument.

“Why couldn’t he just trust me?” I asked softly, feeling the aching pain of having wanted his approval, the support that said I could do no wrong, and if I did, he would bandage me up and let me try again without judgment.

“Because the trust he should have had was shattered by others. Not just by the werewolves who killed Liza, but by Liza herself. He’d trusted how he trained our children, trusted their judgment, trusted that they would listen when situations were dangerous. Liza didn’t, and she died. He didn’t just stop trusting the world, Jacky. He

stopped trusting himself as a father, a mentor, and a teacher. His grief overwhelmed him.” Subira crossed her arms around the staff. “Then he started making the very mistakes he had never wanted to make.”

“Well...” I made a face. “I’m not ready to forgive him.”

“I’m not asking you to.”

“How can you still...” I didn’t finish the question, knowing it was a terrible thing to ask.

“Stand by him and love him?” Subira seemed nonplussed by it.

I winced.

“Because I know who he is and who he’s not.” She nodded toward the memory of Hasan, his fury uncontained. The room exploded, all the furniture becoming tiny pieces of debris. Almost instinctively, I thought how I didn’t want to get cut up by all of it and it froze, leaving me and Subira in a snapshot of the memory, much like the memory of fighting Rainer had frozen.

“He’s not the man I confronted that day. He was fighting a lot of demons that day, just like we all have personal demons to fight, as you know. He never wanted to be the man he was that day.” Subira waved a hand. “Let it continue. We’ll be safe.”

I took a deep breath and did.

I wasn’t ready to have peace with Hasan. Understanding didn’t mean I had to forgive. That was the high road, certainly, but it wasn’t just what he had said or done to me. It had been about how he treated Dirk.

“I tore the family in half,” I said, fighting the guilt I felt. It wasn’t enough guilt to make me back down from how I felt about Hasan, though. If I could just do as he asked, none of this would have happened. I put on a brave face and vented frustrations, but deep down, I still felt terrible for all this. I also wouldn’t change a single thing about it. I would defend Dirk and Landon until the day I died. I was going to marry Heath Everson, and no one was going to stop me.

“No, you didn’t. You drew an important boundary. You stood up for what you believe in, for those you promised to stand beside. You’ve done it with our family before as well. You didn’t break anything, Jacky. And we both know that those thoughts and feelings don’t come from this moment, not entirely. They are from something from a different time and place, from the eyes of someone who can’t tell the difference between this and what happened back then.”

“I don’t remember what happened when I was young, Subira,” I reminded her, shaking my head. “Hard to go to a memory to confront it, if I don’t remember it at all.”

“You don’t?” Subira turned and stood in front of me, ignoring the argument she had with Hasan that day. “Are you sure?”

“Positive,” I growled softly, not liking what she was implying.

“Jacky, if you didn’t remember at all, then it wouldn’t haunt you. Something in you remembers.”

“No, it doesn’t. My human family treated me pretty badly. It’s probably just like—”

“Hasan was mean. He said cruel things. I know all of this. He’s reacting to a feeling caused by someone else in our lives you remind him of. You remind him of the circumstances. He’s scared for you.”

“And?”

“And he recognizes how badly he hurt you because he wasn’t the first to do it. Just like you aren’t Liza, he’s not your biological father.”

Those words slapped me.

I wasn’t sure why, though.

“I know he’s not. I thought you weren’t going to try to make me forgive him.”

“I’m not trying to make you forgive him. I’m trying to make you think of the girl who is holding on to the pain. Not the grown woman in front of me. The little girl you claim you forgot, but clearly, your body remembers. Your heart and your mind remember, Jacky, and we need to get to it because it has lived with you far longer than anything else.” Subira pointed at Hasan. “He is not your biological father.”

He wasn’t my biological father. I knew that. I knew he was consumed by grief, and that caused him to be irrational. I wasn’t stupid. He said mean things. They were awful.

He never hit me.

Those words went through my head, and terror gripped me.

I ran from her. I ran from Subira. I ran out of the room, ran from Niko’s home, and escaped to the forest, running at full speed, unable to stop.

He never hit me.

When I felt deep enough, secure enough in the dark trees, I sank down.

He never hit me.

Who hit me?

No one hit me. I don't remember being hit by anyone.

I heard the werecat before I saw it.

It wasn't alone. Subira had followed me, her scent full of guilt and sorrow.

"Don't bother with that," she ordered, pointing at the werecat with her eyes on me.
"It'll protect you only so far before it ruins you."

"I..."

"Let me tell you what I know to be true. Don't keep running. You'll get lost, and that will make this harder for us... and then we could lose you entirely."

I so desperately wanted to keep running, but Subira stood right in front of me, looking ready to grab me if I tried.

"When you became a werecat, Hasan told me, and I was too curious. You see, I raised all of my children until that point from their younger years. Some were much younger than others, but they were all children when they came into my life."

Subira knelt in front of me, and I couldn't help looking up and seeing the werecat hovering there, just waiting for me to try to run from everything again. The next time, it would help me escape her if I couldn't face what she had to say.

"I took a small sample of your blood and looked through your memories, the ones you had at the time. Of course, I don't know everything since then."

“What? That spell you talked about doing for the boy?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because I knew right here...” She touched her heart. “That you were my daughter, and I wanted to know you, but you weren’t ready to know me. You know that.” Her hand dropped. “I also wanted to know why and how the world kept you from me and Hasan for so long. I have never believed in fate or destiny, but something in me ached that I hadn’t been able to see you grow up. So, I watched you grow up through your memories.”

“Oh.” I couldn’t fault her. I wished every day that I had met Carey sooner, gotten to see the eleven years she wasn’t in my life. My heart said she was mine , but I hadn’t always been there to help her to be as close to a mother as I wanted to be. I craved stories of those days I hadn’t known her.

“Yes, and let me tell you with certainty that you remember,” she said softly. “You certainly remember... but I understand why you don’t want to.” Subira reached up to wipe her eyes.

“I’m scared,” I whispered, shaking.

“Me, too,” she said, holding out her hand.

I took it.

“Can you lead us there?” I asked, swallowing.

“I think you already know what to think of.”

I did.

Someone had hit me.

The watercolor memories changed.

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I had thought seeing them in Russia that I had closed the chapter on this part of my life.

I hadn't considered that it would linger, still causing more damage.

I saw Michael and Helene Duray laughing as they watched television on the couch. Gwen and I were playing on the floor, mostly ignored.

"I thought I had left them behind," I said again, this time out loud.

"I also like to believe I've left my father behind. It's always painful to recognize that we never truly can," Subira replied, sighing.

"You know, in Russia... they pissed me off so much, and I was so grateful to have Hasan."

"Until he repeated a similar pattern. Which opened the wounds."

I knew she was right.

I didn't remember this moment in life, so I watched and waited for the quiet peace to end. My mother must have had something to do because she left, grabbing her keys to go buy groceries or whatever she did when she left the house when I was little.

My father wasted no time, calling someone and smiling.

"She'll be gone for the night," my father said.

“Oh, I knew long before I was ten,” I said softly as my mother’s friend walked into the house sometime later.

“Girls, go to your rooms,” our father ordered.

Gwen and I didn’t fight, but a feeling rushed through me. She was our godmother, wasn’t she? I always wondered why we didn’t see her around when she lived nearby...

Now I knew.

“I repressed knowing about the entire affair.”

“You did.”

“I told my mom at ten, but I knew years prior.”

“You did.” Subira’s simple confirmation was good, not offering more, just confirming what I was ready to think about. It was already hard enough to be here.

I saw my six-year-old self peeking out of the room, wanting something. Maybe to see my godmother, to hang out with the adults, to see if anyone would play with me and Gwen. Maybe just curiosity.

I caught them kissing. I was caught seeing them kiss.

Michael had stomped over to me, grabbed my arm, and hissed into my ear.

“You saw nothing. Do you understand?”

I felt chills down my spine.

When the child-me nodded, he practically tossed the six-year-old into the room and closed the door.

“Oh, that must have left a mark,” I said, shaking my head. “Probably was explained away as me jumping on the bed or something.”

“Correct.”

I was actually grateful she knew me better than I did.

Time passed. I watched it play out at least a dozen times as I got older. Gwen even caught on, seeing the weird things, how our mother’s friend would stay over.

When we were ten, that was when we finally left the house, following me and Gwen to go play outside.

“This seems bad,” I muttered, wondering what my twin and I were about to get involved with. Subira said nothing, letting me live with my thoughts alone this time.

“I can’t believe Dad is doing this to Mom,” Gwen said, sitting on the log in the woods right beyond our house.

“Right?” Ten-year-old me was so over it, I almost smiled. Gwen and I watched a lot of television. We already had a concept of dating and cheating. We weren’t doing it yet, but we weren’t fools either. Dad was kissing the wrong woman. “We need to tell Mom. She deserves better, right? Margie is her friend . And Dad says we need to listen to what we hear at church, and the church says a husband and a wife are meant for each other.”

“Yeah,” Gwen said, nodding. “But you know Dad. He’s always told us not to say anything. You know how mad he gets.”

“I can tell Mom by myself. I just feel really bad knowing about this now.”

“It’ll make Mom upset,” Gwen pointed out.

“Then Dad shouldn’t have been so stupid!” young-me said, huffing.

“Oh, gods, I was meddling,” I said, looking at Subira. “Would you want me to tell you that Hasan kissed another woman?”

“Oh, yes, so I could tear his balls off and feed them to him,” Subira said with a tight smile. “But I have more respect for myself than your mother had for herself.”

“Ouch,” I said softly, looking away from Subira. I wasn’t sure if it was her threat that Hasan cheated or her insult to my biological mother, which was the more painful part of that statement.

“Okay, so the next time Dad is gone, I’ll talk to Mom. I might need you to back me up. We both know. We both saw it.”

“Alright, Jacky... if Mom needs me to say it, too.” Gwen nodded.

And we waited until that moment. I felt adult fear of knowing these two versions of Gwen and me were in for a rude awakening.

“Mom, can I tell you something?” young-me asked, finding our mother working on dinner that evening. Michael was at work, and Helene was home with the kids. It was like that a lot. My mother wasn’t a stay-at-home mom, but I couldn’t remember her work schedule, either.

“What is it, Jacky? I’m busy.”

“I saw Dad kissing Margie.”

My mother dropped what she was doing.

“Don’t ever speak about it again,” she said, not looking at the younger me. I, the adult walking invisibly in the memory, walked closer to her to see the tears in her eyes and the fear in her expression.

“Mom—”

“Enough, Jacky.”

“But—”

“Enough, Jacky!” My mother, Helene Duray, turned and popped my cheek. It wasn’t a full slap, but it startled the hell out of the younger me. “When your elders tell you to be quiet and drop something, you drop it,” she hissed at the ten-year-old me.

“Mom...”

“You must be lying because your father would never do that to me,” Helene said, suddenly deciding to change the narrative. “He loves me, and I love him. I don’t know why you suddenly want to start these rumors and lie about your father, but I will not have it.”

I was a child. I didn’t understand that my mother was destroying my sense of reality with that tactic.

“She believed me,” I said, fuming as I watched the ten-year-old version of myself get punished for trying to help her mom. “For a second, she believed me.”

I watched my younger self turn around, and I followed, only to see Gwen standing just around the corner, watching but not saying anything, not stepping up, not helping me. She heard our mother call me a liar and hadn't tried to help me.

"She was a scared little girl here, but I think this is why you two never had a real relationship," Subira said.

"Why did I repress the entire affair?" I demanded. "Why all of it?"

"Because of the day you confronted your father about it," Subira answered.

I was twelve. I saw myself working on something on the dining room table, angry about something.

"Your mother is visiting your grandparents this weekend with your sister," Michael Duray said as he walked through the dining room.

"Why couldn't I go?" I asked, revealing the source of why I had been angry.

"Because liars don't get to go visit their grandparents. You're grounded here," Michael snapped, stopping at the table.

"I am not a liar! I was just helping the other kid! You told me we should help people!"

"Jacqueline, we are done having this conversation! You got into a fight on the playground. I don't care what the reason was anymore! No one else saw the boy push that girl. You need to stop making up stories about people."

"Like how I must have made up you kissing Margie?" I snapped at him. "I know what I saw, but Mom started calling me a liar when I told her. Now, I'm always the

liar, huh?”

I froze. My childish temper had gotten the better of me that day. The scene froze with me.

“You told your mother what you saw. She called you a liar,” Subira said, whispering as she rubbed my back. “But you never saw Margie again.”

“No, I didn’t,” I confirmed, remembering all of it, knowing what happened next.

I stood there, letting the memory continue, knowing.

He was angry that I had been the one to catch him. He hadn’t known it was me. My mother must have confronted him and Margie but hadn’t revealed it was me. She let me live the lie, to be the villain to her for some reason.

My father, knowing his perfect image had been smeared by me, was furious.

He’d beaten the shit out of me.

A twelve year old couldn’t run fast enough or scream loud enough. He’d taken the belt to me—not just to my butt, but my back and legs—until I gave in. I never outed Gwen, never said she saw it, too. She’d already shown me she wasn’t willing to say anything, and I couldn’t let her get hurt, too.

“I lied! I’m sorry,” I screamed for him, sobbing in fear and pain.

“You will never lie again. Do you understand me?”

And I would never mention any of this to anyone, knowing everything that came out of my mouth would be a lie to them.

“They made me take two weeks off school, telling me that sometimes bad kids needed to be punished.”

“They were monsters who didn’t deserve you,” Subira snarled. “And they were very good at making you believe that no one would help you for what they did. That they were just being good parents, that they had the right to treat you like that.”

I was shaking as I sank next to my twelve-year-old self. Alone, sobbing, having lost everything—all her trust in her parents, her faith that they were supposed to raise her right and protect her.

I became the problem child. I couldn’t say anything, thinking no one cared about me or my truth. I worked my ass off to get good grades, always falling short of Gwen, always tainted by the crimes I had supposedly committed as a child. My truth didn’t matter to them because it didn’t fit their narrative.

“How did I forget?” I asked.

“You wanted to,” Subira answered. “You needed to.”

I wanted to pick up the young girl in front of me and take her away.

Something had died inside me that day, and I knew it wasn’t over.

“When she got home, my mom said I must have deserved it.”

“I know.”

“It’s not even that bad?—”

“Don’t say that. It destroyed you. You had two options. Live with it and remain

staunchly yourself with a righteous sense of right or wrong, or let them break you. The moment you had a chance to forget, you did.”

“I didn’t decide to forget,” I whispered, wondering if I had really done it to myself.

“No, you didn’t. You never told anyone. You didn’t tell your sister the truth about it. You didn’t tell your friends. You didn’t tell Shane. It was something you didn’t even want to think about. Eventually, you became a werecat, and it became something you didn’t remember, forging ahead with a new chance at life, leaving it behind entirely.” Subira sighed. “Perhaps there was some magic involved. Perhaps to keep the curse in check, your mind corrected for you, hiding this devastating piece of your life.”

“You think so?”

“If this had happened to a werecat child, they wouldn’t have survived it, not in their human form,” Subira said as she sat next to me.

They would have gone through the Last Change and tried to protect themselves... because I had given into his claims to do the same thing for myself because I had no other way of protecting myself.

“There’s no way of knowing the truth, but think of it like this... if you remembered that, would you have been able to stand in the same room with anyone who claimed to be your family?” Subira reached out and touched my shoulder. “There’s a reason I never brought it up, knowing that forcing this could hurt you. Sadly, we didn’t have a choice, thanks to what’s happened to you.”

“I...” I just wanted to cry. I just wanted to forget again. I wanted the pain to go away. My father had gone about his life thinking he’d done nothing wrong. That was how he could look me in the eye in Russia.

My biological parents were monsters.

“He broke me,” I cried softly, covering my face, sobbing alongside the younger version of myself, right where my father had left her.

“He got very close, but you are so strong, Jacky. You are so strong.” Subira wrapped her arms around me. “You kept going. You never lost yourself.”

“Why couldn’t they love me?”

“Because they loved themselves more and didn’t know how to love you. They didn’t even know the meaning of the word.” Subira held me tighter. “But I will always choose you over me. You hear me? I will always trust you. I will always love you. You won’t break our family. You never broke that one. It was always broken, and they needed someone to blame.”

I nodded, letting her hold me as she told me everything I needed to hear.

“And Hasan, for all his faults, will never hurt one of his daughters the way your father hurt you,” she whispered, sounding like it wasn’t meant for my ears but something she was telling herself, a promise she was making or a truth she was reminding herself of. “Nor the way mine hurt me.”

I pulled away, looking at her. Her father was the original werecat, a brother to the witch who had cast the curse that afflicted both of them. He was, by all whispers I had heard, a monster.

“What do you mean?”

“What? Did you hear me?” Subira asked, frowning.

“Yeah.”

Subira’s eyes went wide. Clearly, she hadn’t meant to say it out loud.

“Oh. That would explain the change in scenery,” she said, exhaling a terrified breath. “You heard my thoughts while we were...” She released me quickly. “I wasn’t paying enough attention.”

I looked around and had no idea where we were. It wasn’t anywhere I had ever seen before.

“Where are we?” I asked, wondering what games the fae magic was playing now, grief being buried by fear.

“We’re deep in my memory now,” Subira answered, sounding more scared than I had ever heard her. “Just... let it happen, Jacky. If we’re in my memory, maybe that means I can break this connection, and your time in the dreaming land here is over.”

“What are we about to see?” I asked. I heard a whimper and turned to see Subira looking just the way I knew her, but not.

She was on the ground next to the base of a tree and was bleeding. Most importantly, from between her legs, a bump on her belly told me the truth. I wanted to gag as I looked for anyone else, knowing the real Subira was standing near me, focusing on trying to deal with the magic and get through this moment.

I found Hasan on the ground, and if I hadn’t known he was alive and well in the modern day, I would have been convinced he was going to die, based on his injuries.

“What happened?” I asked, pleading to Subira, turning back to her. “Who...”

“This is what my father did when he learned of my pregnancy,” she answered. “The pregnancy I carried for the husband he had decided on, but I forged a real relationship with. He’d attacked me, and when Hasan tried to help me, my father tore him up.” She pointed to each of the bodies in the memory. “Zuri and Jabari were my second pregnancy. This was the fate of the first. They don’t know that. I promised myself I would only give birth once. It took over five hundred years for me to be ready to try again a second time. After giving birth to the twins, I decided no more.” Subira took a deep breath. “Now, let us go. It’s time, Jacky. You weren’t supposed to see this. Let’s not linger, please.”

She held out a hand, and I took it, knowing as I held her hand that she was the strongest woman I had ever met. She had just journeyed through my worst memories, able to shoulder those with me. I wouldn’t ask anything more about this and wouldn’t try to linger.

As I looked back at Hasan’s broken body in the dirt, I saw a man I would never see in my human father—a man willing to die for his wife and children. He was always there.

I just needed to heal a little longer before I could handle the immense weight of what this scene had accidentally given me.

HEATH

Heath walked into the basement of the pack house. It was time for him to face the full truth of what happened at the reception. He was ready. He felt better than he had in days, knowing Jacky was going to survive the poisoning, thanks to Subira and Olivia. He had that assurance; now, he had to make sure something like this never happened again. He wanted to do it before she woke up, so she wouldn't worry about him. He was glad she was going to wake, yet worried she would try to stop him to protect him from facing what he knew he had to face, eventually. Not just the betrayal of a pack member but the fight he would have to deal with after.

She would try to stop me because she loves me. I have to fight because I love her. I want her to wake up as soon as she can, but I can't have her stopping me.

I'll figure out what I'm going to say to her after it's all said and done.

Jenny and Carlos were still there in the basement. They had been alone now for nearly twenty-four hours. Neither of them spoke or even looked up yet.

He felt bad about leaving Carlos down in the cell, truly bad now. He'd hoped Jenny would confess her crimes beforehand to save the man from this. Now, he had to step in because it was time for her to meet her fate. They looked up as he approached and stopped in front of the cells. He could smell fear on both, but he knew the sources had to be different.

"Hello, Carlos, Jenny." He put his hands behind his back, looking between them as he greeted them.

“Hello, Alpha,” Carlos said first. Jenny quickly repeated it.

“You both know why you’re still here,” Heath said softly. “So, let’s get started. Landon!” His sudden raise in volume made both of the werewolves in the cells jump. As Landon approached, Heath knew what he was about to do was cruel but necessary.

“Remain silent,” he ordered the pair. “Landon, take Jenny. I want Carlos alone.”

The smell of Jenny’s fear rocketed up, becoming the dominant smell in the room. Landon had to drag her out as she kicked.

“That’s enough. Walk,” Landon snarled, the order making Jenny pop to attention and walk correctly. “With me. Now.”

Heath waited, watching them go. Once he knew they were far enough away, he looked at Carlos.

Carlos wouldn’t have done this. He was letting Jenny believe for a moment that he blamed the werewolf in front of him, but he knew without a shred of doubt that Carlos wouldn’t have even known.

“You can speak now, but you should listen to me first.”

Carlos nodded, not saying anything, so Heath began.

“She was probably promised a full pardon for you,” Heath explained. He didn’t have the hard evidence he wanted. “She loved you but didn’t know you well enough, did she?”

“I guess not,” Carlos mumbled.

He's never wanted a pardon. He's going to feel guilty for what he did for the rest of his immortal life. Even if it fades, it will linger and bother him.

Heath knew Carlos's story. He'd been married happily to a human woman. They lived with and supported her family. They had a child together, only a year old when everything happened. His wife died suddenly, failing to become a werewolf when she tried to survive being Changed, and everything turned upside down for the werewolf.

His in-laws had blamed him for their daughter's death.

Carlos was forced to hand over everything he knew about any vulnerable werewolves. The single werewolves, the lower-ranking ones that many would lose track of in larger packs, and any loners who passed through. Those werewolves would disappear and never be seen again, most probably murdered by humans looking for the thrill of killing a werewolf. He did it all so his child's grandparents would tell him where his son was once they felt he paid the debt they believed he owed them for their daughter's life. It went on for a year.

None of the humans survived the situation. Only Carlos, a young werewolf who had betrayed his own kind and ended up with nothing, not even the one life he had risked everything for. His son wasn't found alive, having been neglected by the vengeful, greedy in-laws who didn't want to help raise the son of a monster they believed Carlos had been. The in-laws were just greedy. That was all there was to it. Carlos had just been a desperate father, unable to find his baby and too young to know how to ask for help, grieving the death of his wife and worried any wrong move would mean he never saw his son again.

So, Heath had taken him in, understanding that Carlos could have made better choices, but rationality had left him under the strain of the misfortune in his life.

Carlos had never wanted forgiveness. He certainly hadn't wanted a second chance at

a normal life. He wanted to die fighting to help people, wanted to get himself killed for it all. He had until Jenny and he met. They all knew Jenny helped heal him better than anything. There had been hope.

“Were there any signs she might betray us that you might have missed?” Heath asked softly. “No blame. We all miss things. Clearly, Landon and I missed everything, too.”

“She’s a fixer,” Carlos whispered. “I knew it was getting toxic, our relationship, but...” Carlos closed his eyes. “I told her when Dallas was having problems that if I could ever have you as my Alpha again, I would take it. Tywin tolerated me because you had promised I would have a place there. Recently, she was really freaked out by how Fenris had betrayed us, thanks to all that fucked-up fae magic. She was worried you would throw us out for Jacky, that Jacky hated us. I kept trying to tell her it was fine, that you would always make the right call?—”

“I would throw all of you out for Jacky if she needed me to,” Heath said quickly. “Make no mistake about that.”

“Yes, but you had given no sign of needing to do that. Jacky was hurt, but... after everything I’ve seen about her, I wasn’t nearly as worried. I guess I should have taken Jenny’s worry more seriously.”

“Did she get mail I need to try to find? We have reports she burned things in the fire pit.”

“She would get letters from other old Dallas pack members, which I didn’t think too much about... but any good werewolf knows not to contact any in a rogue pack. I figured...”

“That friendships could last, and it was a reasonable bending of the rules.”

“I always worried she had lost her friends because of me wanting to follow you here. I didn’t want to take them away from her if she had them.”

“Of course.” There were no lies coming from Carlos.

“I’m sorry I didn’t say anything. I just wanted to keep my head down, be a good werewolf for you... I never thought she would...” Carlos put his head in his hands.

“Will you stop me from killing her?” Heath asked gently.

“No,” Carlos answered.

Heath opened the cell door and stepped back.

“Go stay with Roselyn and Piper. They’ll be waiting for you. They’ll help you move if you need to get away from memories of her,” Heath said, waiting as Carlos slowly stood up.

The sad man finally nodded and walked past him. Heath followed him out. This was going according to his expectations. He made sure Carlos got into his car and went to Roselyn and Piper.

Then he walked into Kick Shot, finding Jenny losing her mind but unable to say anything or act on it.

“He’s gone,” he said to Landon.

That finally broke Jenny, who screamed.

Heath felt only a twinge of guilt. He’d dealt with too many betrayals to feel much more than that. Jenny knew the score.

“Enough,” he finally ordered. “Speak now or forever hold your peace.”

“It wasn’t supposed to be Jacky!” she screamed. “It was supposed to be you, and without an Alpha, the pack was supposed to go to Callahan and get added to the others!”

“Then why did you attempt it after you saw me set up a glass for a second person? You knew I would share with the woman I plan to marry. It’s a reasonable assumption to make.”

“Because Carlos wanted you as his Alpha! I thought if she was dead, you would finally see it was a good thing and go back to Dallas, be a normal Alpha again, and everything would be okay again!” Jenny looked up, tears running down her face. “But even now that she’s dead, you still pick her over us, your werewolves!”

“She’s not dead,” Heath said, smiling a little. “Subira, her mother, found me before breakfast. Jacky will be waking up soon. She’s been through something very rough, but she’s not dead.”

Jenny’s eyes went wide and her body limp as she sank back in the chair Landon had sat her down in. Landon was smirking.

“What?”

“Did you think I was sitting on my hands doing nothing over the last few days?” Heath laughed, full-chested. It felt mean to do that in front of Jenny, but he truly didn’t care.

“You killed Carlos even though she lived? He had nothing...”

Heath stopped laughing, dropping all mirth.

“Carlos is letting me kill you without putting up a fight,” he told her brutally, knowing it was the final thing he needed to break her. “Thank you for admitting that the hit was on me, and you decided to see if you could kill Jacky instead. That means this is no longer only werewolf business. It means I can tell her family anything I want, and no one can stop me. Did you put it in her glass? We haven’t figured out what’s wrong with the bourbon yet. I didn’t see or smell anything in her glass.”

Jenny was hollow-eyed. Knowing Carlos, the man she loved and was fairly obsessed with, was not there and was allowing this to happen to her was a fatal blow to her heart. He didn’t have to kill her. He was still going to, but he didn’t have to.

“It was in the bourbon. Only needed a tiny drop. I was given a capsule, no bigger than a small pill. Hid the capsule under my nail... Cracked it while messing with the bottle, let it drop in natural, unseen.”

“Landon, make sure it’s completely disposed of,” Heath said. “How long did you have it?”

“Since a couple of weeks after Alaska. Callahan sent it in a letter. Promised Carlos and I would go to an Alpha who would treat Carlos similarly to you, and it would be better... But Carlos always said he only wanted you. So... I waited, wondering what I was going to do. The reception seemed like a good time because... you would be distracted. Everyone would be distracted. I had to do something, or I would lose what he offered by waiting too long.”

“Thank you for not fighting me for these answers,” Heath said, smiling. “Now, come with me.” The last part was an order. “You and I have a meeting.”

Jenny stood and followed him, Landon taking up the back, still silent, still pleased with how methodically they had done this. It was a good thing. Minimal deaths kept the pack as strong as it could. They were only going to lose one instead of all of them.

Heath led Jenny and Landon to the security building. Hasan had decided it wasn't a good idea to use something Jacky could accidentally run into.

"Is that her?" Subira asked from the porch.

"It is. She'll be dealt with," Heath promised his lover's mother.

"Good," Subira purred. Heath knew damn well if he didn't take care of this final part, she would. He hadn't told Subira the rest of his plan, though.

"If Jacky wakes up while I'm gone, tell her I love her, and this is for her."

That made an eyebrow raise, but Heath didn't stay for a response. He opened the door and went into the Tribunal, bringing Jenny and Landon behind him.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 9:36 am

HEATH

“Before we begin, I need to say something to the Tribunal,” Heath said loudly as Landon closed the door behind him. He finished the walk down before speaking again, glad his son was behind him in the face of the Tribunal.

He looked at Callahan and Corissa. While Callahan was normally the one with an easy expression to read, now it was blank. Corissa seemed less put together than she normally did. An odd switch.

He reached the bottom of the circular viewing room, all seats higher than those who would speak to them. They only accounted for a quarter of the circular room, while the rest was seating for others who wished to see proceedings, depending on what was happening. There were some placed for those speaking to the Tribunal to stand, and he found one, not yet going into the center of the room, where the open floor was used for more intense interrogations, judgments, and the like.

“As I was the Tribunal member you asked to call this meeting, I shall be the one to ask... what do you want to say?” Hasan was leaning forward in his seat.

“You called a meeting for a werewolf?” Corissa said, her expression pinched.

“I’m the only one he has access to on a regular basis to make the request,” Hasan said, smiling viciously. “Though to hide that I did it, I asked Alvina to pass the meeting along to the both of you.”

Did he not tell them what I intended? Does Callahan not know I’m here to challenge

him?

Hasan continued to smile as he gestured to Heath to talk.

“Hasan, this is the werewolf who betrayed my pack and poisoned your daughter, knowingly taking the risk that it would be Jacky, daughter of Subira, who ingested it and suffered the consequences.”

Hasan turned slowly to the werewolves of the Tribunal.

“No,” Corissa gasped.

Callahan closed his eyes as if he was accepting something.

“Because I was the intended target, I will handle it.” Heath reached out for Jenny, who didn’t see it coming. He grabbed her jaw from behind and twisted.

Her neck broke.

Neither he nor Landon tried to stop her body from crumpling to the floor.

After a few minutes, Hasan gestured to someone and Corissa nodded quickly, confirming something. A large male werewolf came forward, having been standing at the end of the Tribunal’s seats near a door Heath hadn’t cared much to look at for long. An aide for the day, possibly, or a guard ready to jump into action in case the Tribunal members themselves were outnumbered. In what world would the members of the Tribunal be fighting in their own chambers, Heath didn’t know, but he knew all of them were the type to plan for the potential. It would have been an early security conversation for this group.

“Leave the body. She’s not important,” Landon said, stepping around Jenny’s corpse

to stand next to Heath once again. Heath wanted to question his son about the callousness, but it was a small urge, overwhelmed by his coldness at her betrayal and his focus on what he had to do next.

The werewolf growled softly at Landon, but Corissa shook her head slightly, and the werewolf backed away.

Landon dared to growl back.

“Before Landon and my pack start picking fights with each other, why don’t you tell us what is going on, Heath,” Corissa said, glaring at him.

You don’t know, but you have a feeling.

“I am here to challenge Callahan, member of the Tribunal, for his position,” Heath announced loudly. In a room full of warriors and politicians, most of them had near-perfect poker faces, but they couldn’t hide their scents.

Corissa was angry and scared, the latter being something Heath had to focus on for a second to catch. Hasan was impressed, amused, angry, and frustrated. It grew so complicated and unbelievable, Heath had to ignore Hasan’s scent. The vampires were bored, barely amused, clearly distracted, and looked as if someone had interrupted their beauty sleep. Alvina was more expressive than Brion where they sat next to each other, the current King and Queen of the fae. Brion was responsible for the only other two times a change of leadership had happened in the Tribunal. First, when he disappeared and abdicated the throne in the process, and the second, when he needed to step up, kill his brother, and take the throne back, along with its position on the Tribunal. Heath had been there for the second, at least part of it.

The witches, Johann and Matilda, were humored.

While he judged their reactions, ignoring anyone not on the Tribunal, he walked into the open area, knowing this would be where he and Callahan fought. He wouldn't take this back to Jacky's home, nor would he go to Callahan's city or some random place where he couldn't reasonably get home if something turned sideways. He wanted to do this here. If that meant painting the walls of the Tribunal's main chambers red, then so be it.

"You think your moon cursed are going to war, and here we are, watching the infighting," Matilda taunted softly.

"Challenge accepted," Callahan said, ignoring them as he stood.

"Now, wait. We can talk about this," Corissa snapped, grabbing Callahan's arm as he tried to step away from his seat to meet Heath. "Callahan, we had a plan!"

"I won't deny Everson the pound of flesh he deserves," Callahan said, gently pulling his arm away. "You shouldn't either."

That made Heath narrow his eyes. Callahan looked at him, sighing.

"Jacky wasn't the target," he said, shrugging one shoulder. "And I should be furious, but you killed the werewolf who decided to gamble with lives unnecessarily, as any of us would. When someone takes a job, it should be done right."

"You're talking about poisoning a rival Alpha who hasn't acted against you," Landon snarled.

Heath held up a hand, telling his son not to speak out of turn again.

"He hasn't?" Corissa, not nearly as calm as she normally was, turned her hard glare on Landon. "He has, though. Going rogue was acting against us, but we let it go.

However, we can't abide by a werewolf stepping around us, working for other supernaturals in a position of power. Like Heath did in Oregon, using his reputation among humans to do something for the werecat ruling family without going through us. We would have done it, but it undermined us and our position on the Tribunal."

"And other werewolves noticed," Heath concluded, speaking up to get her attention off Landon, her hard eyes turning on him as he hoped. Corissa nodded, putting her hands in front of her on the table.

"Oh, yes, they did," she said. "Some have been wondering why more packs can't be rogue and handle things their own way while we've been trying to work with Hasan and the rest of the Tribunal about the idea that witches are taking control of our kinds. It clearly worked out for you, and we haven't done anything about it. Some of them are using your position to say that if you can decide your own allies outside of the werewolves, like powerful forces like Hasan and his family, then they should get to decide their own allies and who they would rather just kill."

"I knew I would be a target one day. I expected a different route, but I knew I would be one," Heath said, removing his blazer slowly. "But we can talk about what plan you had after the fight."

"Callahan, just step—" Corissa was turning to her mate again.

"We both knew this could go wrong. We didn't expect this way, but it was one of the things we considered. We thought the risk was minimal, hoping that little werewolf would just do what we needed her to do." Callahan smiled at his mate, and Heath could see the sadness in it, smell it from across the room. "I will be fine, my Venus. Will you stand as my second to discuss with his?"

"I will," Corissa said, losing the battle with Callahan that Heath didn't fully understand yet. He would get to the bottom of it if he was alive to do so after the

fight.

“I’ll make sure we have the space for this,” Brion said, standing up. With a strain that Heath had never seen from the fae king before, he pushed his hands apart, and the room literally stretched, making the open space half the size of a football field.

“Thank you,” Callahan said, nodding to the fae king. “I’ll take this end, Everson.”

Heath went to the far side, where the werewolf had been. That werewolf was finally getting Jenny’s body off the floor, taking her to the rooms away from the main chamber, most likely to dispose of her.

As he and Callahan took their positions and started to strip, Landon and Corissa met in the center. He was immensely proud of his son for a moment, the fearlessness of Landon helping him stand tall in front of the strongest werewolf in the world. Corissa was the most dominant wolf, but the fact that she was having issues with problem packs now was actually a positive to Heath. She also didn’t wish to rob the will of other werewolves, and she could certainly try to force everyone in line. She could shut down dissidents by using an iron fist, but she hadn’t, and Callahan hadn’t tried that, either.

Instead, they had a plan to deal with me, the real source of their problems. It’s better for all werewolves for them to have gone this route. But Jacky got hurt, and it seems Callahan understands that no matter what, this fight is happening.

It was a fight that had been brewing between them for some time now, but Heath had to give the challenge as the lower-ranking werewolf, and he hadn’t wanted to. He never thought of taking the Tribunal seat until this. He had never wanted more werewolves to deal with. He wanted to protect his family. He thought he could do that from the position he’d been in, keeping out of the way.

I should have stayed out of the Alaska situation. I know I should have, but Jacky and her family weren't playing nicely with Callahan and Corissa after the truth about Fenris came out. Jacky had spearheaded that, her grief in the way, and no one faulted her for that... but I should have stayed in Texas.

"So, what the fuck, Corissa?" Landon asked boldly.

"Watch your tongue with me," Corissa snarled in reply. "Your father gives you too much leash sometimes."

"My apologies. You go first, then," Landon said, bowing gracefully, backing down but still with all the typical Landon attitude he was known for to all the werewolves from other packs. With his utter disregard for their positions, he intentionally robbed people of their supposed power because he didn't care about pack structure or rank outside of his position to Heath.

"Can you convince your father to have a reasonable discussion right now instead of this challenge?" Corissa asked, crossing her arms.

Landon looked at him, and Heath could only shake his head. Whatever real game these two had played, he would learn later. It didn't matter what their intentions were anymore. Jacky got hurt, and he was going to make sure no other werewolf every thought to act out of line and put her in danger ever again. If being on the Tribunal gave him that power, he was going to take it. It also solved their problems. No one would wonder anymore about the direction of the werewolves, wondering if they could follow Heath's path and go rogue or if they should stay loyal to the Tribunal werewolves. He would be able to forever change the direction of the werewolves, one that worked in his favor, just so he could be with her.

It only made sense to Heath that he had this fight, and he wasn't willing to back down.

I can do the job better than Callahan.

That small, arrogant thought ran through him as he faced down his last few minutes before he changed the supernatural world or died.

“No,” Landon said, smiling, though he was showing enough teeth that it was more threatening than mocking. “Jacky got hurt. Don’t care what you two were planning or why. Don’t care that this will rattle all the other little werewolves around the world with a new power dynamic. All we care about is making sure no one from the werewolves ever touches Jacky or anyone else in our family ever again.”

“Please listen,” Corissa whispered, looking from Landon to Heath.

Heath turned his back to her and began the Change.

“No,” Landon growled. “You played your games. They didn’t work, whatever they were. Now, it’s time for us to play ours.”

Five minutes passed, and as Heath stood as a werewolf, he turned to Callahan, who was also finishing. Heath pushed to Change faster and faster as he got older, trying to be the best, learning to push through the pain of it quickly. Callahan had age and experience, probably learning the same lessons as Heath over his years. They were both fast in the process, while most werewolves took at least ten to fifteen minutes, if not longer.

Callahan was probably six inches bigger at the shoulder and had twenty pounds more muscle, a truly giant werewolf, and Heath was well beyond their average size already. Landon was somewhere between them, just thanks to what he was. They were probably the largest werewolves in the world at this point.

It’s been a long time since he’d been the smaller one in a fight... After today, it will

probably never happen again.

No one had to tell them when it was the right time to start. Both were experienced Alphas who had fought to the top. They knew the timing, making sure Landon and Corissa were fully clear and no one else was about to jump in. It happened sometimes—spouses trying to save their mates and the like or worse, children thinking to save their parents. Since this was an organized fight, there was no real rush to launch into the fight.

Until the switch flipped, and they both did.

Teeth slid off muscles through fur, unable to gain purchase. Aiming for vulnerable areas like the back of each other's legs or, better, bellies. A debilitating injury like a broken or maimed leg would end a fight decisively.

Most of the fight was precision attacks dodged by experienced fighters. Callahan was as good as Heath could have imagined with his roughly two-thousand years of experience as a werewolf. Heath was scrappy, knowing if Callahan killed him, he wouldn't be able to protect his children or Jacky ever again. Heath thought his own motivation would be fiercer than Callahan's, but the Tribunal Alpha was taking him seriously. Heath knew if he was caught, there would be a killing blow. Callahan was fighting for his own life, and he wasn't going to give Heath even a moment of respite through arrogance to take an easier victory.

Heath slipped up once, teeth sinking into his back leg. He had an answer for it, though. Spinning, he ignored the bone cracks of his leg and grabbed Callahan's tail. Callahan, with more muscle and a better grip, tried to shake Heath like a toy, but Heath used that to rip Callahan's tail clean off, much easier than removing a back leg.

There was blood everywhere, thanks to those injuries, causing the marble floors to grow slick. Fights like this were meant to happen in the grass and dirt, out in nature,

where the blood would soak into the ground. Instead, both of them were now fighting to keep their purchase, and at their size and speed, it led to more mistakes.

Callahan lost an ear next, Heath ripping it off when he'd hoped to get the back of Callahan's neck. Heath felt teeth hit his ribs and break at least a couple. Callahan was unable to get a good bite, but the force of the hit was enough to do real damage.

Heath made some distance, knowing the ribs and the back leg were going to be the death of him if he didn't get something better against Callahan. They prowled in a circle, knowing they were both trying to think of a way to finish this without dying themselves. Heath was slowing down because of his injuries, but Callahan was bleeding out because of the ripped-off tail. Both of them looked bad.

Heath went for it head-on. Callahan faced him, but Heath stayed lower than Callahan was expecting, perhaps the blood loss taking more effect or expecting Heath to be bolder in the head-on charge. Heath got right under Callahan, whose teeth tried to get onto his back, but Heath got to Callahan's belly, and he got the bite he really needed.

With a howl of pain as Heath pulled him down by his belly, Callahan hit the ground with a resounding thud. He didn't completely gut the other werewolf. Knowing he did severe internal damage, it would be enough. Heath released Callahan's belly to rise over Callahan's head, ready to take out his neck instead. Ready to kill him the way he saw Jacky kill, just to drive the point home, for people to talk about later. Callahan fell unconscious, slowly dying.

"STOP!" Corissa screeched as Heath set his mouth on the neck of his fallen enemy.

"Don't interfere!" Landon roared.

"He did it for me!" Corissa screamed. "He never wanted to be on the Tribunal. He never wanted any of this! He was planning on stepping down to you! When you

survived Oberon's Test, he was going to step down for you!" The smell of her horror, the escalating realization that her mate was dying, overrode the smell of all the blood on the floor.

Heath heard the words but felt distant from them, felt distant from human thought. A fight like this could bring out something primal in the moon cursed, and he was deep in it. He growled, trying to listen, trying to fight the urge to just finish the fight and never have to worry about Callahan again.

"He was protecting me! All of it! He only ever took this position to protect me!" Corissa's pleading made Heath think of his enemy differently.

Something human, the cunning of a ruthless man, came back to Heath.

He's useful to me alive, for control over her and keeping things as stable as possible for the NAWC...

"Tell her if she kneels, I'll spare him," Heath said to his son mentally, the first time he'd used the werewolf communication ability the entire day.

"Heath Everson, member of the Tribunal, will spare Callahan if you kneel, Corissa," Landon called out, already giving Heath the title he had just won.

Corissa was running. He growled as she tried to get closer to him and Callahan. She went to her knees and inched forward slowly.

"Please, just let me save him," she whispered, giving up her position as the strongest werewolf Alpha in the world. "I can't lose him."

Heath released him and took two steps back.

“There will be a meeting once Callahan’s condition has stabilized and Heath’s injuries have been tended,” Landon announced.

“I better be at that fucking meeting,” someone snarled. Heath turned slowly to see Jacky standing at the door at the top of the tall stairs, glaring at the room. Behind her, Subira hovered, smiling. She was staying only inches out of the Tribunal space she wasn’t allowed to enter without very specific permissions.

“Oh, yeah, sure,” Landon said, grinning as he turned to her as well. “Good to see you up.”

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I dreamed more, but it was natural. A picnic with Heath, then a wedding where Carey smiled brightly at me and Heath as we walked down the aisle. There were other faces, but they were blurry. I could have guessed who they were, but the knowing didn't matter as much as the feeling the dreams gave me. It was a sporadic, normal dream. As I woke up, the images were already fleeing my mind, to be forgotten by the time I got out of bed.

Or before that, seeing how many people were in my bedroom hovering around the bed, staring at me expectantly, like they were waiting on bated breath.

"You're awake," Dirk said, sagging as he leaned on the bed, grabbing my hand. "You're awake."

"Hey, Dirk," I said, smiling. I was sore, but I pushed up and squeezed his hand. It was only a second before I realized the bed was wet and the room smelled like blood.

"Oh, I need to..." I tried to get out of bed, but another hand grabbed me for a second.

"Taking a deep breath first," Niko ordered. "Tell me if you feel dizzy or anything. Let's make sure you can walk before letting you try."

I followed his orders and tried to ignore how I was certainly in the blood I could smell. My head felt good, clearer than it had been in a long time. There was soreness in different areas, places I recognized, knowing the cause perfectly, but they weren't nearly as painful as they had been. I wiggled my toes for Niko, who was convinced I needed a head-to-toe check, then noticed Olivia hovering.

“Hi,” I greeted, smiling at her. “My mother told me you were here.”

“So, you remember,” Subira said from the door, leaning on the frame. “That’s good.”

“I do,” I said, nodding. “And I feel fine. Can I get up?”

“I’ll help you get cleaned up. Niko, let your sister go.” Subira came closer, taking Niko’s place and helping me from the bed. I was naked and covered in blood that someone had tried sponging off but didn’t finish or couldn’t reach all of it. It was all my blood, though.

Weird thing to feel good about, but it meant no one else got hurt. I’d take it as a win.

Being naked also didn’t bother me, not in this particular instance. Subira walked into the bathroom with me, forcing me into the shower before I could start asking questions or wondering what had happened while I was trapped in my own mind.

She joined me, getting the blood from my back, butt, and legs. That startled me, but her grip was iron.

“Let me help,” she said, holding my ankle as she scrubbed my leg, the one that had been broken.

When I was finally scrubbed raw, the smell of blood going down the drain with a full bottle of body wash, all of my shampoo and conditioner, and an entire bar of soap, Subira let me get out.

“I know how to clean myself,” I reminded her, trying to dry off.

“I wanted to tend to you in reality,” she answered, patting my shoulder with a towel to dry me off. “I don’t often get to tend to my children like this.”

“Maybe because we’re adults who all know personal hygiene.”

“Perhaps,” she said, smiling. “Perhaps because the modern world doesn’t believe in community bathing anymore.”

“Wait, so you would do this with Jabari or Zuri?”

“Have, will again. We came from the same time. Bathing in rivers and the like. Helping each other reach all the difficult spots was as natural as eating a meal together,” she explained. “I know you aren’t as comfortable with it, but...” She met my eyes in the mirror. “I would rather you be a touch uncomfortable here and know that I will do anything for you and with you than let you be alone right now.”

I swallowed. If she wasn’t there, I would have gone back to thinking of my memories of childhood or, worse, her memory of that terrible day I wasn’t supposed to see.

“Thanks,” I whispered, letting her towel me off without fighting against it. It was comforting, the attention from her, which was warm, gentle, and caring, but also just respectful enough not to turn me red from embarrassment. I felt her fingers glide over the scars I had, most of them bullet holes that were fading slowly, but they had been caused by silver, so they would never fade entirely.

She went out to get me clothes, leaving me to my own thoughts for a few moments. I couldn’t stop myself. I reached out to my territory, letting it reconnect with me after I felt so disconnected with it in my mind. I did a mental tally, starting with each person closest to me.

Subira is right outside. Niko and Dirk went downstairs. Olivia isn’t doing any magic right now, but I bet she’s down there as well. Ranger is down there, too. Huh. Teagan is in my office...

Shamus is at Kick Shot with Stacy, Kody, Arlo, and Benjamin. He must be on young werewolf watch.

I reached out further.

Roselyn and Piper are at home. Carlos is with them? Carlos is always at home with Jenny.

Ah.

Jenny is missing.

So are Heath and Landon.

I opened my eyes, staring at my gold eyes in the mirror. I remembered everything I had just gone through. It was easy to put the pieces together.

Heath, Landon, and Jenny. Jenny isn't high-ranking enough to be at an important meeting.

She's either going to die or is already dead. Is she on the run, and they went after her?

It upset me knowing Heath wasn't going to be out there once I left the bathroom. I wanted to see him. A little part of me wouldn't know this was real yet until I saw him.

Subira walked back in, putting down a simple outfit I would have picked for myself, and noticed my eyes.

"How does your territory feel?" she asked benignly.

“Two of my werewolves are missing,” I answered. “Any idea where they could be?”

“Only two?”

“I don’t keep traitors,” I growled softly.

Subira put a hand on my shoulder.

“For the best. They took the traitor to those who needed to see the traitor and finish up what they need to do after such a betrayal.”

“Have you seen them?”

“I saw them go into the little security building you make Dirk live in,” she answered, teasing me.

“They aren’t there now,” I explained.

“I know,” Subira whispered, running her hand over my head.

“Killing Jenny and sending her head would have been enough, so why did they go to the Tribunal?” I suddenly needed to see Heath. Subira noticed the change in me, keeping herself in front of my closed bathroom door. I got up and grabbed the clothes, throwing them on, only to face her there.

“Answer, please,” I pleaded. I could have handled him being gone for a moment, but the need to see him was overwhelming.

He was supposed to be here. I’m not home yet. I need to see him.

“You’ve been distracting me from his absence,” I accused.

“Just a little,” Subira confirmed. “For your benefit and his. Not to meddle but for safety.”

“Subira—”

“Jacky, you were accidentally hurt by an attack on him from the Tribunal Alpha werewolves. They are dealing with other packs who are rejecting their authority. You weren’t the target, but you were hurt. Heath has every right to set this straight and make sure it never happens again.”

“The only way to stop the power jockeying of werewolves is to fight it out until everyone feels like they are in the right spot!” I yelled, and once it left me, I knew that was exactly what was happening.

I had known it was possible one day but hadn’t thought far enough ahead. I thought I had time, thought it might never actually happen, that Heath could live quietly with me in my territory outside of the werewolf nonsense unless it came to our door.

It did come to our door. It left me fighting through my worst memories...

“He could die,” I whispered, reaching around Subira to get the handle. She moved to the side and let me run past.

“Worse,” Subira said as I ran out of my bedroom. “He could win.”

That made me stop at the top of the stairs, looking over my shoulder at her.

He could become a member of the Tribunal. He would be the most dominant male werewolf in the world.

“And you can’t stop it,” Subira said. “Or help him.”

I kept going, running down the stairs, going through my friends, and nearly running over my brother. I got outside and was nearly at the door when something stopped me and pulled me back hard.

“You can’t interfere, Jacky!” Subira snapped, having followed me outside, stopping on my porch. She held up a hand as I looked back at her.

“Fuck that stupid rule!” I growled, getting back up to go into the Tribunal if I could.

“It’s not about the rule, Jacky. It’s about distracting Heath and getting him killed!” Subira’s thunderous words made me pause. They also brought out everyone else. Everyone in both my home and every supernatural in Kick Shot was now moving toward me.

I looked at Niko, who was resigned. He had known. Carey was there, rubbing her arms, also worried, but not surprised by any of this. Dirk was even more worried; his now-husband was there with Heath.

Landon might watch his father die...

I turned to see Shamus with the younger werewolves, walking down my driveway, drawn in by Subira’s thunderous words.

He’s keeping them together in case they need to leave before other Tribunal werewolves show up to dismantle the pack.

Teagan slipped out, Olivia beside him. Ranger hobbled out last, not wearing his prosthetic.

“I assume you’ve been getting paperwork ready for whatever might happen,” I said to the old werewolf, the gentle soul who chose our little rogue pack over going back to

the bigger packs he'd once known.

"I am," he confirmed. "And setting up a contract for Olivia to continue to work with us as a healer, so long as we lend werewolves to her animal rescue."

"Oh, that's nice," I said, feeling a little crazy as he had turned this into a very casual conversation.

Dirk trotted down the steps and approached me, wrapping his arms around me.

"I just want to see him," I whispered, shaking as I wrapped my arms around him too. "I just want to know he's okay."

"I know," Dirk said, rocking me a little.

Instead of going back inside, I sat with my mother, brother, nephew, and all the werewolves outside, watching and waiting for news.

"You don't have to..." I looked at Shamus and the young ones. Sure, Stacy and Kody were fully adults by age now, but they were still Shamus's kids. Arlo and Benjamin were older teens, still certainly considered children by the conditions of immortals.

Sometimes, I was still a child when it came to immortals, and I was over forty.

"Would rather be here waiting with everyone else for our Alpha to be victorious than alone, ready to run," Shamus said, smiling. "And you might not be a werewolf, but you're part of this bigger family, too. It's just as dysfunctional as yours, so you might not welcome?—"

Something made Shamus quiet. I looked at Subira to see she was unamused by the humor of Heath's third. He'd shut his mouth once she had made eye contact with

him.

“He’s teasing,” I promised her.

“I hope so,” she said, smiling but Subira was a master of the smile that meant she would turn someone into a blood splatter if they kept up whatever they were doing.

It was only a few minutes of this when Subira, of all people, had a phone going off.

“Ah.” She got up and walked to the security building, and I was the only one brave enough to follow her immediately.

I grabbed the handle, recognizing her gesture that I could, and pulled it open.

I wasn’t expecting the scene I walked into. Corissa was nearly crawling to a werewolf’s body, a werewolf who had certainly lost the fight, who left blood all over the marble floor of the now huge Tribunal main chamber. A wolf I recognized was standing over the body, also bleeding and bloodied, but the winner.

Heath had the other wolf by the neck.

“Please, just let me save him,” Corissa whispered, making me realize it was Callahan who was down. “I can’t lose him.”

Heath released Callahan’s neck and took two steps back.

“There will be a meeting once Callahan’s condition has stabilized and Heath’s injuries have been tended,” Landon announced.

My anger snapped, knowing if I wasn’t standing there, there was a chance no one would come to tell me about any of this happening until it was all well over and

settled.

“I better be at that fucking meeting,” I snarled. I was staring not at Landon but at Heath, his ice-blue werewolf eyes looking up at mine, a boldness in their expression.

“Oh, yeah, sure,” Landon said, grinning as he turned to her as well. “Good to see you up.”

“I mean, really?” I started down the stairs. I remembered almost too much. “I have been in a drug-induced nightmare coma for...”

“Three days,” Subira called out from the door behind me.

“Three days!” I growled. “And neither one of you assholes thought to leave a note for if I woke up? Or to wait a fucking minute before trying to get yourselves killed?”

I stomped down the stairs. Landon’s eyes went wide as I approached.

Heath, the brave man, bleeding and injured in his werewolf form, only watched my approach, not moving an inch.

“I mean, really, Heath! How am I supposed to tell you I want to get married next year if you go and die before I wake up?” I roared at the werewolf.

“Oh, shit,” Landon said.

Subira laughed.

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“ I will make a quick recommendation that future meetings do not need every member of the Tribunal. The moon cursed will handle the moon cursed,” Hasan said quickly as Subira continued to laugh. The others nodded, but Hasan didn’t wait for approval. I watched him come down, passing Heath’s stack of clothing, then come directly to me.

“We’re not having this argument right now,” I growled.

“We’re not having any argument. It will be forever known that Heath Everson, member of the Tribunal, was yelled at by his recovering fiancé, who is also my daughter,” Hasan said quickly, waving a finger at me to follow him up the stairs as he practically tried to run from the room. “Let’s not give the rest of the world any more comedy from our families today. Give him and his son a minute to get him Changed, and we’ll have the family discussions in your territory.”

I almost said no, but when he turned to fully look at me, already closer to Subira than me, an image flashed in my head.

It was odd to reconcile this powerful man with the broken body I had seen in Subira’s memory. A broad chest that had seemed caved in. A trim abdomen that had been unable to hold all the parts in. His perfectly attractive face that once had a mangled, broken jaw.

How he’d been put back together was beyond me. How he survived the toll of it, I would never understand.

He didn’t smell or look angry. He didn’t seem surprised by the events of the day. He

didn't show any indication that he was getting his proverbial teeth pulled to have to do this.

"Okay," I said, starting back up the stairs.

Heath and Landon didn't take the time Hasan provided for him. Before Subira could close the door, Heath was limping up the stairs in wolf form, Landon carrying all of his clothing.

"Hey, we still got that witch around here?" Landon asked loudly.

Hasan didn't seem surprised hearing that, which confused me more. Olivia approached, meek and scared of the large man who was suddenly with us.

"Hello," Hasan greeted, studying her, a little wary of the timid woman.

"She's good," Subira said, patting Hasan's arm, and he relaxed. "Here, sweetheart. A bit of power to put that one right again." She pricked her own hand with a nail before holding it out to Olivia.

I stopped watching that and started watching Hasan. There were a dozen werewolves around, and Heath was injured, so there were some getting on edge between that and Hasan's presence. Niko was pushing through them as they all backed away slowly.

"Father," Niko greeted, smiling. "How are you?"

They exchanged a hug with all the masculine back-patting involved.

"Good. It's been an interesting couple of days, sending those two in circles over what was going on," he said, chuckling afterward.

"Can you explain that?" I asked, frowning.

“You were hurt, which meant all bets were off,” Hasan answered, smiling with gold eyes. “You deserve the full story, though. All of you do. They told me they were going to act, not specifically saying Heath’s name, but also not needing to. They promised you wouldn’t get hurt. My hands were tied because they needed to handle the packs, and Heath was an active problem. To stop them would have been undermining their entire position on the Tribunal and putting all of us at risk of being disorganized with witches running around trying to control us.”

“He warned me of this as well. He wasn’t trying to keep it a secret. He shouldn’t have told me, truthfully,” Subira said, holding a small tissue to her palm now.

“Okay...” I waited for more as Hasan adjusted his sleeves, rolling them up to his elbows.

“I didn’t tell them you were hurt because it pissed me off. I went to Alvina for information.”

“This I knew,” I said.

“Good. Heath reached out to me because I could make a meeting with the Tribunal. I got him to tell me the why of it so I wasn’t in the dark. I intentionally didn’t speak to Callahan and Corissa about why the meeting was going to be called, asking others to pass it along without the full information. It was my petty way of throwing them off guard for Heath’s challenge. It was technically interfering...”

“But I got hurt.”

“But you got hurt,” he repeated, nodding. “And I knew with Heath, if he won, there would be no such worry about you getting hurt again. It was in my best interest for him to win.”

“That’s absolutely interfering,” Landon said, chuckling. We were still waiting as

Olivia tended Heath and for him to Change.

“Oh, well. Everson, will you report me?” Hasan asked, turning to Heath, who was letting Olivia set his leg and focus on the healing spell she was trying to use to heal it.

Heath shook his head.

“Though it was interesting to hear that Callahan had intended to step down,” Hasan said, crossing his arms.

“Oh, please explain,” Subira said, leaning on her mate like he was a wall.

“If Heath had gotten through Oberon’s Test, that stupid fae poison Jacky ended up drinking, then Callahan intended to step down for him. Learning that Callahan never wanted to be on the Tribunal for the sake of the power was... less unexpected. He’s always been the weaker of the two politically. Corissa is the powerhouse on the Tribunal out of the two. I don’t know how I never saw it, though.”

“I could perhaps explain that further,” Teagan spoke up softly. He was the oldest wolf, having been in Corissa’s pack at some point. Everyone looked at him, including me, hoping for him to do just that. Explain.

“It’s rather obvious,” Teagan began. “They came from a time when someone like Corissa would have been seen as reaching beyond her place. Pretend to be the good wife, pretend to let the husband be in charge. He loves her for everything she’s ever been, so he let the charade happen to protect her from anyone who would consider killing her and putting a puppet female in place instead. He defended his spot on the Tribunal to defend her on the Tribunal. He was an Alpha in his own right, so he couldn’t actually be her second, but he acted in that way for her, all to stop any potential werewolves who come from different times from trying to get rid of a woman that would offend their delicate sensibilities about a woman’s place.”

“And it would be more of an issue among werewolves than it would be for werecats, where I have never been challenged in my place because we’re too isolated and distant. Even if some werecats may have the problem, we’re isolated and out of each other’s ways often enough. We don’t rely on a rank structure or anything. Versus a werewolf who would have to take orders from a woman they hate.” Subira hummed, nodding. “And how does that mean letting Heath take the position by Callahan stepping down?”

Landon cleared his throat.

“I can put together the rest of their plan. Pa and I will get it out of them, but I bet I’m right. If Callahan had stepped down, Pa wouldn’t have pushed Corissa to bow her head. MY father doesn’t have the inclination to challenge a woman like that, which is what Callahan must have wanted to stop all these years. Or, obviously, killing her and finding a weaker female Alpha to put there to be forced to listen. Avoid the fight, avoid losing a mate, and avoid losing Corissa’s position for all werewolves as the most dominant Alpha. Also, unity over division.” Landon shrugged. “This was a series of war games, shoring up the power in the right places, making sure their positions were correct and stable. Just like a pack before a hunt, anyone having issues might bicker and fight for the right spot in the run, and once everyone feels right, we can run together without problems.”

Heath was Changing now, clearly healed enough by Olivia to feel comfortable going through it. I was just listening to everyone on the outside. I had gone through my own battles and had my own thoughts and experiences over the last few days. Ones that made me keep looking at Subira and Hasan together, looking at ease among the werewolves. Such a radical change from Hasan only a few months ago.

With Heath Changing, we were silent, waiting on him. When he was finished, we let him get dressed.

“I’ll get to all of that later,” he said, buttoning up his blazer. “First...”

My heart skipped a beat as he walked to me, grabbed me, and kissed me in front of everyone. I wrapped my arms around him, letting him spin me.

I was home.

“You want to marry me, huh?” he whispered as he put me down.

“I was thinking late spring or early summer,” I said, smiling.

“I like that,” he agreed, kissing me again.

“I’m going to pay for this wedding,” Hasan whispered. I looked around Heath for a second to see he was whispering to Subira.

“I’m glad you know your place,” Subira replied, smiling. “Even if you don’t want to.”

“I want to pay for this wedding,” Hasan said, his eyes on his mate.

“Really?” I asked.

Hasan looked at me, straightening up.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because...” Hasan trailed off. “Because he makes you happy,” Hasan finished, looking as if he wanted to say more, but that was the only thing he had.

I couldn’t smell a lie.

“We’ll need to talk about this,” I said, not sure I trusted it yet, this Hasan who accepted Heath.

“We can, certainly, but the man I saw this week, today in the Tribunal... I can’t deny that he loves my daughter, and it’s foolish to keep trying to stop this.” Hasan wrapped an arm around Subira.

“You know, I bet Callahan and Corissa considered that, too,” Subira said, leaning into Hasan. “Allow Heath to step into a Tribunal spot, married to our daughter... Suddenly, the rulers of each of the moon cursed tangled into a single family, and it’s accepted by both sides. We’ll rule both together, in whatever balance we find.”

“Well, we already were bound by a marriage in one way,” I pointed out, looking at Landon, who was now with Dirk.

“I’ll talk to Callahan and Corissa about it once he’s recovered enough to speak. I’m going to need them for a lot in the coming days. She’s the Alpha of the Tribunal pack, and I need to meet all of those werewolves. Beyond that, I only challenged Callahan for the Tribunal position. I need to see if he’ll be willing to keep the LA pack and a figurehead position on the NAWC.”

“Pa, you won all of them,” Landon said. “Taking all three only makes you more powerful.”

“And leave me with less time. I also got something better. By showing mercy to Corissa, I took her position as the most dominant werewolf. I can leave her and Callahan with projects, like his pack being the public face. It will stop the frustrating balance of the Tribunal members being too known to the public. That’s not a dance I want to do if I don’t have to.”

“The world can think you are the quiet, semi-retired Alpha you are right now,” I said, realizing the genius of that but quickly backing away from it. “But can you trust him?”

Either of them?”

“I think I can, but we’ll play it by ear,” Heath said, kissing my cheek. “Where’s Carey?”

“Inside, playing video games with Arlo and Benjamin,” Teagan answered.

Heath let me go and went to find his daughter, who shrieked in excitement to see him. She would have known he was out here, but I had seen her dip out while he was being healed, unable to look at him torn up by Callahan. Hasan and Subira went to have a conversation privately by the trees; no one, not even Niko and me, could hear it. Heath didn’t come back to me, having to check on his werewolves and explain changes that might happen. Niko helped Dirk and Landon haul my entire bed—frame, mattress, and everything else—out of the house.

“Where am I going to sleep?” I demanded.

“We’ll figure it out,” Heath said loudly, chucking out the pillows that had specks of blood on them.

“Wow.”

“Jacky,” Hasan said softly. I turned quickly, not realizing he had snuck up on me. I was watching so much happening that I hadn’t been paying attention to my magic. His eyes looked sadder than they had when he went to talk to Subira.

“Yeah?”

“I’m so sorry,” he whispered, no longer with gold eyes, but human. “I know we might not be able to repair everything, but I want you to know that I am going to do my best to. If I can’t, I won’t force it, either.”

“Did she tell you about what happened when I was young?” I asked, hugging myself as I looked away from him.

“She said that if you wanted to tell me, you can now, and I know the warning when I hear it. I won’t pry.” Hasan sighed. “She did tell me what you saw from her memories.”

“You were there, so that’s fair,” I said, swallowing. “It was your life, too.”

“Any questions?”

I searched his face, seeing pain and vulnerability. This was a man who did not share everything, nor was it easy for him when he did. I understood the mystery of him and Subira better now.

They had lived through nightmares they didn’t want to hurt their family by sharing.

“Just one,” I admitted, knowing I couldn’t ask everything, not right now. “Are you okay?”

“Are you?” he asked in return.

“I’m doing better now.”

“Me, too.”

Not broken, that was what Subira had yelled at me. The family wasn’t broken, and she wouldn’t let it break. It had been battered and bruised. It was still healing, but I knew too much now to look at Hasan and think he was just an asshole. He knew too much about me to think I was just being petulant and disobedient.

“Want to walk with me?” I asked him. He nodded and followed me as I went toward

the trees. Niko and Subira were hanging out on the porch and waved as we passed them. Hasan and I didn't talk on the walk, but it felt good, a reminder of our earliest days when we would walk around his island together.

When we got back over an hour later, Corissa was there with two of her own werewolves. I had felt the arrival of the three unrecognized werewolves, but their location hadn't made me fret. Subira and Niko being at the house saved the werewolves from needing to fight if one had broken out.

"Are you waiting on Heath?" Hasan asked Corissa as we passed by her.

"We already spoke for a moment. He told me the theory you all had about Callahan and my plan," she said, not looking directly at Hasan.

"Oh?" Hasan's tone reminded me of an older brother. "And?"

"You all were right... except we had been considering Heath to be Callahan's successor for years now. A stable man, family-oriented, willing to take on larger opponents..." She finally looked at Hasan. "But then he decided to step down from Dallas."

"Oh, a pity," Hasan said, chuckling.

"You accused us of sending him to seduce your daughter. What's stopping me from accusing you of sending her?" Corissa asked, and that made me raise an eyebrow.

"It pisses them off when you start saying that, trust me." Hasan made a face, one that seemed a bit silly with an eyeroll. "Considering Heath is the winner here, maybe you shouldn't start that line of discussion?—"

"Do you two ever turn it off?" I asked them, wondering why Corissa was even still there. "And can I help you? Do you still need something?"

“She’s waiting on me,” Teagan called out, leaving the house. “Heath wants me to review how her operations in the Tribunal work.” Teagan made a gesture for Corissa to go back into the Tribunal. “Sorry about that,” he whispered to me before following Corissa and her two werewolves inside.

I watched the chaos continue to unfold. New arrangements were being made. The packhouse construction was going to be sped up. Hasan eventually left with Subira. Niko went home just to get some peace. Landon and Dirk left, taking Carey to give me some time in my house by myself and to enjoy an evening with Heath, who I was waiting for.

I was patiently waiting, not wondering how I could waste my time or anything. Just waiting.

It was dark when Heath fell onto the couch beside me, where we were relegated until the bed was replaced, which would take a couple of days.

“Welcome back,” I whispered, leaning my head on him. “Busy day taking over the world?”

“Busy day trying to make sure every werewolf on the planet knows that I will always choose you,” he said, kissing me. “Do you want to train with me tomorrow? I think I want to establish combined werewolf and werecat forces who could work well together. We can do it together. Hasan shrugged when I mentioned it to him, so I think that's okay if I can find the werecats...”

“Yeah. I think I can help with that. Find the werecats, at least.” I smiled. “Can I be on one of these teams or whatever you want to call them?”

“Only if you’re on mine,” he whispered in my ear.

“Obviously. I’m tired of not having you through everything. I think we need to stop

letting it happen. Germany, Alaska, investigating the witches, my nightmares.”

“Agreed,” he said, pulling me in for a long kiss.