A Blood-Like Rain

Lyv Aiken

STORYPDF

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Contents

— Chapter One — 7

— Chapter Two — 15

— Chapter Three — 19

— Chapter Four — 24

— Chapter Five — 29

— Chapter Six — 33

— Chapter Seven — 39

— Chapter Eight — 44

— Chapter Nine — 51

— Chapter Ten — 55

— Chapter Eleven — 60

— Chapter Twelve — 66

— Chapter Thirteen — 71

— Chapter Fourteen — 79

— Chapter Fifteen — 85

— Chapter Sixteen — 92

— Chapter Seventeen — 97

— Chapter Eighteen — 102

— Chapter Nineteen — 108

— Chapter Twenty — 112

— Chapter Twenty-One — 117

— Chapter Twenty-Two — 124

— Chapter Twenty-Three — 129

— Chapter Twenty-Four — 133

— Chapter Twenty-Five — 138

— Chapter Twenty-Six — 144

— Chapter Twenty-Seven — 151

— Chapter Twenty-Eight — 159

— Chapter Twenty-Nine — 164

— Chapter Thirty — 170

— Chapter Thirty-One — 174

— Chapter Thirty-Two — 180

— Chapter Thirty-Three — 188

— Chapter Thirty-Four — 194

— Chapter Thirty-Five — 198

— Chapter Thirty-Six — 204

— Chapter Thirty-Seven — 210

— Chapter Thirty-Eight — 214

— Chapter Thirty-Nine — 219

— Chapter Forty — 223

— Chapter Forty-One — 228

— Chapter Forty-Two — 233

— Chapter Forty-Three — 237

— Chapter Forty-Four -- 243

— Chapter Forty-Five — 249

— Chapter Forty-Six — 255

— Chapter Forty-Seven — 264

— Chapter Forty-Eight — 271

— Chapter Forty-Nine — 278

— Chapter Fifty — 284

— Chapter Fifty-One — 289

— Chapter Fifty-Two — 295

— Chapter Fifty-Three — 301

— Chapter Fifty-Four — 308

— Chapter Fifty-Five — 314

— Chapter Fifty-Six — 320

— Chapter Fifty-Seven — 327

— Chapter Fifty-Eight — 334

— Chapter Fifty-Nine — 339

— Chapter Sixty — 343

— Chapter Sixty-One — 349

— Chapter Sixty-Two — 354

— Chapter Sixty-Three — 359

— Chapter Sixty-Four — 364

— Chapter Sixty-Five — 368

— Chapter Sixty-Six — 377

— Chapter Sixty-Seven — 383

— Chapter Sixty-Eight — 388

— Chapter Sixty-Nine — 394

— Chapter Seventy — 399

— Chapter Seventy-One — 403

— Chapter Seventy-Two — 406

— Chapter Seventy-Three — 411

— Chapter Seventy-Four — 415

—Chapter Seventy-Five — 420

— Chapter Seventy-Six — 426

— Chapter Seventy-Seven — 430

— Chapter Seventy-Eight — 434

— Chapter Seventy-Nine — 438

— Chapter Eighty — 445

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— Chapter One —

THE MINIMUM AMOUNT OF EFFORTS

— Kaden —

I was sitting on the stone wall that surrounded the barracks with Sam, drinking beer and trying to stay away from the office for a while.

The day was beautiful. The sun was bright, but there were enough clouds to diffuse its intensity without darkening the sky. It was warm, but not too humid, and the breeze made training more comfortable.

We were a little far, but we could see the men training a little further. They were doing hand-to-hand, and with them were Darren and Eva.

I hadn't had time to check on them much in the last few weeks.

Darren was covered in dirt from head to toe for all the times he'd been thrown on the ground. Eva was dressed as if she'd chosen her workout outfit for a photo shoot. Can't say she didn't look great, but I'm not too sure she got the gist of practicality. She was also a lot cleaner. I've a feeling people are a lot less comfortable with throwing her down as much, but she wasn't as clean as she'd been when she started, and her hair was fraying out of her ponytail.

She may not have all the grace of a seasoned warrior, but she did make out for it with enthusiasm. She looked like she was having a great time.

"You watched their training some?" I asked Sam.

He took a pull from his beer.

"Some," he said. The wall was high enough for our feet to dangle above the ground.

Darren was getting his ass kicked by Anders. He didn't land that many punches, but when they did land, Anders was pushed back a meter or so by the sheer force of it. Eva was clapping in the back and behaving like his personal cheerleader.

"He's not the greatest warrior I've ever seen. He lacks technique. But he had some ground work done, so he's not starting from nothing. He's no match for our bests, though, but when he hits… Damn man, blood does make a difference. I could train all my life and never land one like that."

"You've trained all your life, dumbass," I told him.

"I know I'm good. But I'll never have that potential," he said thoughtfully. "I can pile on as much muscle as I want, it'll still be not enough to match that."

"More muscles? You nearly have to walk sideways through doorways," I mocked.

"Yeah, you're right. I should train more," he said matter-of-factly.

I punched his shoulder.

"Oooowww…" he wheezed. It wasn't that hard. I gave him a look, he just drank more beer.

"They're really motivated," I noted about my sister and her mate.

"They are," Sam acknowledged. "It will take a while before they're battle-ready though, especially her. But him? Give him two to five years and he's gonna be real solid. Might take her more, five, maybe ten, but she's not from weak stock so … who knows?"

"I don't think their goal is the battlefield, just to be ready if anything happens," I noted.

"Not a bad goal."

"No."

I thought some more.

"She has changed. A lot," I said.

"Because of him?"

"Maybe some. She used to be just a spoiled princess. Took me a while just to make her focus her energy a bit more, make her care about more than her social life. She was just starting to be competent at work when he came into the picture. But now she's studying. I mean, man, she's never applied herself at anything. She had the necessary grades to pass at school and that was all she wanted. It was like that about everything. She'd just put in the minimum amount of effort required. Now she's learning a new language and actually studying. She said she wants to study secretarial something or other." I shook my head. "She's training, not impressive, but she's making actual efforts. Last week she was reading our last census and making notes. She gets herself involved in his work and has asked Marie for more." I took a long sip. "I thought she might not want to do more travelling to other packs, considering what happened last time, but she's been studying other supernaturals and has mentioned to me emissary work a few times. I think talking to one who did that kind of job resonated with her. She's involved. She's dragging our sisters in too." I watched her a little incredulously. "Last week, I heard her give lectures to our sisters about getting their shit together."

"She's getting older too," Sam said. "She's barely out of teen. She's learning how to be an adult. Maybe he's a good influence on her."

"Maybe," I said. "First time I saw him, he kinda looked like a lost puppy. Like some kind of arrow that as been shot but had no target, just going in circles, going nowhere."

"He looks focused now."

"Yeah. I think she aimed him right. She gave him a direction."

"Not a bad thing."

"No."

"I guess that's why they're mates. They look like a good match."

We watched Darren make a stupidly wasteful move, he got hit, obviously, but he took the hit well and it got him close enough to give a hit of his own. It knocked the wind out of Anders, knocking him on his ass. It was a risky move, take a hit to win one. Generally you don't do that unless desperate, but he was getting winded and probably realized that if it went on he'd get worse and wouldn't get back on top. He was rushing things a little too much, but the gamble paid off. And Sam was right, when he made a hit, he made it worth it.

He was panting some, while Anders was trying to get his breath back. Eva just rushed to him and jumped into his arms, wrapping her legs around his waist and locking her mouth on his. Within two or three seconds things got heated and some guys pushed them out of the way, nagging at them. Darren just moved away with her wrapped around him like a koala. I've no idea how he could see where he was going but he didn't hit anything and they disappeared through the door that led to the changing room.

"How's been your health lately?" Sam asked.

"Could be better." I drank. Sam was one of the rare ones who knew. Also one of the rare people whom I talked to.

"How bad?" he asked. We were looking at the other warrior tumbling on the ground practicing grappling.

"Getting worse," I answered.

"Attacks?"

"Some," I conceded.

"Heart?"

"I don't know. I've woke up unable to breathe. I mean nothing was working, I wasn't ever trying to breathe. I couldn't even feel my heartbeat. I was just there paralysed, like I was dead, my head just didn't know it yet."

"Man, that sound not good. Could it be sleep paralysis?"

"Maybe. Not sure. But I don't think so."

"But you started breathing again."

"After a while. I don't think it as lasted more than a minute so far."

"You mean it happened more than once?" He turned his head to look at me.

"Yeah. It was rare at first, but now it's nearly once a month." I ignored his stare. I watched the men some more. After a while Sam returned his gaze to the field. We drank more beer in silence.

After a while my sister left the building riding on Darren's back, they were both smiling. They looked like teenagers. He walked on the grass until he reached the dirt path going in Blakeden's direction. She noticed me before they went out of sight. She rose one hand and waved it frantically side to side, smiling at me. Her other arm was around Darren's neck, her legs on either side of his waist. I gave her a single wave.

It reminded me of seeing her on dad's shoulders, doing exactly the same thing, in pigtails and eating ice cream that kept melting down and splatting on the top of his head.

"Kids grow so fast," I said.

"Wait to have some. From what I heard, it's worse when it's your own."

I shrugged.

"You're ever gonna get some?" I asked him.

"Don't think I have the kind of life for that," he said.

"Because you just sleep around?"

"Mostly."

"Ever thought of settling?"

"Some," he said. "Ever thought of settling?" he asked me back.

"Some," I admitted.

"It's not so bad."

"Don't it just, I don't know, feels empty at times?"

"I thought you and Ylva were getting serious."

"No," I said. "Ylva is not the serious type."

"Which is why you chose her."

"In part."

"If it feels empty, then why not try anything else."

I shrugged.

"So you're just gonna wait for her?"

"It's not exactly that I'm waiting," I corrected him.

“But you’re gonna be serious with her or when you’ve gotten her out of the way.”

I shrugged again.

“Ever thought your mate does this willingly to you?”

“You mean like a curse?” I asked him.

He nodded.

“I thought about it. I took measures, talked to a wizard. No one found anything.”

“So it’s not it.”

“If it is, it hasn’t left any trace that we found.”

“What will you do if it is?” he asked me.

I gave him a murderous glare.

“Of course,” he acknowledged. “You have any other idea what is happening then?”

“A million, but anytime I research it, nothing fits. My father has taken it upon himself to do research too.”

“He found anything?”

“He’s calling me twice a week to ask more questions, trying to see if anything fits with what he found. Nothing simple as worked.”

“What about what’s not simple?”

“Then anything goes, man.”

“What do you mean?” Sam asked.

“I mean, someone can make a deal with a god, or reach from the beyond, or use ancient magic from another dimension. At this point, there’s a bajillion ways to do it, but nothing like that can occur without some serious cost. It’s highly improbable for someone to go to such length. The prices for such things can range from one’s own soul, or sanity, or eternal enslavemen—.”

“So it would mean, some major ass grudge.”

“If it’s an attack, then yes,” I concluded

“You don’t think it’s an attack.”

“You think I did things to warrant such spite at thirteen?”

He thought about it. “What if the grudge is about your father and not you?”

“It’s possible,” I admitted. “My father and I considered it?”

"But you don't think that's it?" he said looking at my face.

"It behaves like a mate bond."

"What if they used the bond? What if they took her and are using her against you?"

"Also a possibility."

"You don't think that's it?"

"I don't know if that's it," I corrected him.

"What if that's it?"

"Then what can I do? I can't freaking find her. I've tried everything I could think of. I've nothing to track her with."

"What about magic?"

"I'd still need something to create the link with her. I have nothing."

"What about you, can't you be the thing that links the two of you?"

"Nope, not without at least marking one another. A link must be established first so that I could use it."

"This is frustrating," he said out of options to suggest.

You don't say, I thought sarcastically. I turned my head slowly to glare at him.

He eyed me sideways and drank more beer. He realized it might not be a good idea to keep pushing.

After a few minutes he asked, "Could she be dead? Like haunting you? That's why you feel her, but don't see her?"

"I thought about it, but Ylva saw nothing immaterial hanging around," I said. "Or at least anything like that. She found a few angry ghost but got rid of them," I corrected myself.

"Angry ghosts?" he asked.

"People I killed," I explained.

"So Ylva can exorcise ghosts?"

"No. But Valkyries delve half in the realm of the living and half in the realm of the dead."

"Kinda like reapers for warriors?" he thought aloud.

"In a way," I conceded.

He froze for a second thinking frantically.

I turned to him inquisitively.

“Ylva can sense death right?” he asked me finally.

“Not really.”

“I mean, I saw her twice get real interested in a guy, like her eyes focused real hard, and then not much later, he was dead.”

“Valkyries carry the souls of dead warriors to the hereafter, so when one is about to fall, sometimes she sense it coming, but it’s not the same as sensing death.”

“But she knows when someone is about to die.”

“Warriors,” I corrected.

“But you’re a warrior, you qualify, but she’s not sensing your death. She would have said something.”

“Where are you going with this?” I asked.

“So maybe you don’t die. Maybe you find her.”

“Or maybe I don’t die on a battlefield,” I said.

“Do you have to die on a battlefield?”

“To qualify for a Valkyrie soul extraction, yes. Besides, I don’t worship Odin. There’s a lot of this that could come into account. And Ylva don’t always notice deaths.”

“So she’s not always taking care of souls of warriors?”

“She’s never doing that. She can sense some but she’s no Valkyrie, just part Valkyrie. And not such a big part.”

“How much?”

“It was her grandma,” I said.

“Her father was a werewolf, right?”

“Yes.”

“What about the other? What about her granddad?”

“Man, don’t ever tell her I told you. She hates people knowing.”

He nodded.

“Human.”

“It sounded like you were about to say something horrifying. Anti-climatic much,” he complained.

“It’s horrifying to her.”

“Why?”

“Because she sees it as a weakness.”

He shrugged. “Maybe, maybe not.”

“Exactly. But not to her,” I told him.

“She’s more than strong enough. Don’t see why it bothers her.”

“I’m not sure it’s about her as much as something deeper. I don’t know what, but she’s uncomfortable about her lineage.”

“But not about being part Valkyrie?”

“I think it’s different. She’s mentioned a few times that Valkyries don’t make the greatest mothers—.”

“But her grandma decided to make a family with a mortal,” he mused.

“No. She fought with a warrior and got freaky afterward. No babies were to be involved.”

“Oh.”

We emptied our beers.

“I guess I should stop avoiding work.” I said jumping off the wall.

“Yeah, what if the boss found out?” he teased, but stayed on the wall.

I grabbed his leg and gave one quick pull. He went vertical for a second and landed on his back in front of the wall.

“Remind me to never pick a fight with you,” he said wheezing. I walked away.

He eventually dusted himself off, cursing, then went back to work.

— Chapter Two —

THE LENGTH OF A FEW HEARTBEATS

— Kaden —

I came out of the plane two hours ago, and was already through with the meeting. It hadn't been that complicated. Nubinero had refused all our demands. This was the last minute-ditch effort to end things peacefully but their forces and mine were already in position for battle. Weeks of back and forth. I wasn't that invested in the matter, but a few of my allies were, so I did them the curtesy of indulging them a bit.

There were nine packs in the end who stood here today. Warriors and Alphas. The battlefield would not be so far from Monaweard, the first pack to have raised the alarm about this whole mess, but far enough not to put at risk Mariqueen's territory and non-warrior residents. But still close enough to be a respectable commute.

The place chosen was far enough from humans not to notice and get involved, in the nook of a small mountain range that would—along with its extensive forest—defuse the sounds of battle. Not all conflicts have locations this well prepared, but the extent of human society's sprawl is considerable and it has to be taken in consideration, unless you want to trigger the human warning bells and find yourself facing a government's military might, or find yourself locked in a facility of which you'll never escape. It's not only werewolf society that worries about that, but the entirety of the supernatural world. To take blatant risk with humans can have a lot of other species ready to rally against you to take care of the threat. I've been part of such party before.

Thankfully, Nubinero has not pushed us in a situation where we had to readjust on the fly and risk for this to occur. They've been rational enough to know how problematic this could become, but also that making this conflict fought in a more risqué setting could lead to the involvement of others who were not originally willing to be involved, only to stop them from attracting human attention.

On the other hand, it also meant that they were confident enough in their capacity to fight us head on, without land advantages, surprise on their side, or guerrilla warfare, and still have a good shot at winning, or even taking us down.

We had to be careful about this one.

From what we found, the facility we shut down was mostly a source of income, and their victims aimed at the black market. But they had a few groups they controlled on the payroll, like the one that attacked Ghealach. It was mostly what the facility was financing, and those were bringing in what was far more worrisome things to take into account about our enemy. Super-weapons.

That's what a lot of powerful artifacts can become. Their use are sometimes extremely arcane and particular. Some could only be used by a certain person, some at a specific confluence of planets, others may have widely different result depending on who uses it or how. Knowledge about such artifacts is sometimes scarce, sometimes conflicting, and others completely lost to time.

On the up side, they targeted mostly smaller artifacts, in spiritual weight that is. Those were easier to steel and were not as strongly protected. Or so that was the information I had on them. I could be wrong and they could be holding the Lance of Destiny, or the Book of Thoth, or the Cintamani Stone. That would suck for us.

I'd manage to have a partial list of what they may be in possession of—we also found a few artifacts they sold either because they found no use for it, or were too strapped for cash, or in one case, the artifact attracted too much heat to keep it—and so far, nothing terrified me, but it got me very careful nonetheless.

We were moving in long convoys of off-road vehicles slowly on an old path through the thick forest. The hoods were whipped by branches and brush. It was a trail seldom travelled and it was narrower as we went in deeper. We knew we wouldn't be able to reach our destination on wheels, but the closest the better.

I didn't know how long that battle would be, but one thing I knew is that every battle is possibly the most difficult piece of exercise someone can perform, and everyone needed to save their strength as much as it was possible. I couldn't afford to have my men exhausted before we even began.

It was a long endeavor. We had to stop often to take a fallen tree off the trackway, or readjust our driving to the rugged terrain. But we had calculated this in our schedule and would not be late to our final location.

We could have shifted and run in a fraction of the time, but again, I wanted everyone as fresh and rested as possible. And this way we could carry a lot more with us. Weapons, ammo, or medical supplies. We had food and water too. I've faced battles before that has lasted days. Though, those were generally more a series of small attacks over a period of time than a full on army against army type battle. Yet there were still so many unknowns, and especially when magic is involved, things can rapidly take a weird turn. I wanted to be prepared.

Preparedness is one of the best tools for survival.

It took us a few hours and we gain a lot of altitude, but eventually we had to continue on foot. So we set up camps with the trucks and supplies, and finally trekked the rest on foot.

Some shifted at camps, while others piled on their weapons and body-armour.

Jayson, my beta, was at the head of the team that would take the higher grounds. Many of them snipers, others were ready to charge from a different angle. Mariqueen and her husband were at

the head of the smaller pack and allies. David stayed at camp, and with a team, was getting aerial visuals and was connecting to infrared cameras some of my men were installing around the perimeter as we spoke, along with an array of sensors and microphones.

Him and the team I gave him, would be our eyes and ears and would help us face any eventualities.

After a little under an hour of walking, teams began diverging. We had prepared for multiple directions assault. Ideally we could surround and overwhelm the enemy rapidly and be back for breakfast, maybe even earlier.

I would lead the main charge with a few of my most faithful men. Ylva was with me on this team, as was Sam and our newest recruit Mishka.

I didn't know the guy much and I didn't trust him yet. So I kept a good eye on him. But so far, he had failed to betray us and has proven himself quite a capable warrior.

The group I was travelling with was much smaller now that the other teams, which were moving toward their designated targets.

"Is everything okay?" asked me Sam in a hushed voice.

I looked at him confused at his question. It took me a few seconds to realize my feet were slowing down.

For a second I thought my health might be falling apart at the worst of timing. But I stopped for a few seconds and gave Sam a signal to wait. He signaled for the others to continue ahead and waited silently beside me.

I closed my eyes the length of a few heartbeats and tried to assess the situation. I moved my attention from my head to my breathing, to my limbs, nothing clicked.

Why was I slowing then?

I don't generally do things like this without a good reason, so I shook my head at Sam and moved my attention to our surroundings. Were we observed? Followed?

Sam got the message and scanned the area himself, trying to catch any sign of an early attack.

Maybe this was a magical attack. I tried to feel the air around me, but magic as never been my strong suit.

I gave a quick comment in my earpiece for them to be vigilant and to send a few scouts ahead, just in case.

I found nothing that could have triggered my instincts to be careful.

I began moving slowly focusing on sight, hearing, and most of all smells. My nose was sharper than nearly everyone here, it could have been that my brain picked a smell that was worrisome,

but not strong enough for me to really notice. So I put as much concentration in my task of sniffing the air as I could.

Sam let me track on my own, aware he could throw off whatever I'd find if he got too close, and had stayed behind. But I also knew he was keeping an eye on me. No matter how strong I was, or any of my men for that matter, the rule was you never leave anyone in a disadvantageous situation. Never near a battlefield, would one of mine travel alone, no matter how strong. I was not fond of unnecessary risks.

I was maybe ten meters away from my men when I noticed there was a faint undertone in the scents. Something that didn't fit in this desolated forest.

It was an old smell. Whatever it was, was gone now, and had been so for a long time. I walked a little further, barely able to notice the difference. It's only when I reached a little clearing empty of vegetation, with little other scents to hide it that my eyes widened.

My heartbeat was now beating frantically.

I took a few slow inhales, I needed to be sure I was right.

It reminded me of a drink I tasted in Indonesia. It was made with a rare flower, exotic and not from this realm, the flavours tingling in my mouth. It had been the most tasteful thing I'd ever ingested, yet the flavours subtle, and a little sweet, and intoxicating.

This smell had this faint exoticism to it. Shivers travelled all along my spine, and the hair on my arms stood on ends. My instincts were screaming at me to find the source of this smell and bury myself in it.

My breaths were heavy now.

I found my mate.

— Chapter Three —

WHAT IF IT'S A TRAP?

— Kaden —

I began to panic.

We were heading to battle, but I smelled my mate. I *smelled* my *mate*!

I tried to track the direction the smell came from but it was so faint I could hardly notice it. I moved in circles half in a daze. I found a line, a line she must have been traveling, but I couldn't tell which way she came from and which way she was going. And I tried to sniff both ways to see which seemed the strongest, the freshest.

Sam noticed my change in behaviour and got closer. When I noticed him, I raised my hand to make him stop. I was afraid his sheer presence would make me lose her scent.

It wasn't completely irrational either as my own scent on her tracks was enough to nearly destroy what little clue I had.

I went in further.

I followed one side of the track all the way to a small stream, then I lost her. I checked all over, on the other side, everywhere. The track ended here. My best guess was she walked in the stream for a while, the water masking her scent.

I didn't realize I had bolted in that direction, until I heard Sam running to catch up.

We were far now. The noise of my men, faint in the distance.

"What is it?" asked Sam worried.

"I found her," I said in desperation. "I lost her."

"Who?" he asked confused.

"My bloody mate."

"Fuck! Now?"

"Yeah."

"This is not a good time for this."

"I know," I growled in frustration.

I walked for a while, following the stream. I still couldn't pick up her scent, so I stop.

"What now?" asked Sam.

“I go the other way,” I said.

I went back on my track. It was easier to go by the scent I just left than try and pick hers again. I went at a dead run, Sam could barely keep up.

When I reached the clearing again I slowed down.

“What are you doing?”

I was back to where I was when I found her.

“Here,” I said, drawing an imaginary line in the air with my finger, going from where we just came from to the opposite side. “This is her track. I don’t know what direction she went from but I know this side leads nowhere.” I pointed at where we went. “Which means this is my only chance.” I pointed in the other direction.

Sam looked back at the direction of our convoy then back at me, worried.

“I know,” I said. “It’s the worst timing in the world, but if I don’t give this a chance—.” I didn’t dare finish the sentence.

“I know,” he said.

“I can catch on quickly,” I said. “I just need to know if this leads somewhere.”

Sam nodded. “There is still time until nightfall,” he said looking at the sky.

I looked too. There was time, but not that much.

I nodded. “Keep this quiet. Just in case it leads nowhere.”

He nodded. “Wait…” he said. “You’re going on your own?” It just dawned on him as I turned to leave.

“Keep things tight here,” I told him.

“No one moves alone. That’s your own rule.”

I looked in the direction I had to go.

“What if it’s a trap?” he asked.

“I—.” I hesitated. I shook my head. “I don’t know, but I think I need to do this on my own.”

“You don’t make sense.”

“I know,” I said in frustration. “Go,” I told him.

He looked like he was about to argue.

“I said go,” I insisted.

He looked like he wanted to defy me on this.

I turned and followed the scent. I took my phone out and waved it at him behind me. “We keep in touch.” And I disappeared through the brush.

I gained pace as I followed the track. After a while, the smell got a little stronger and my heart did a backflip. This was the direction she went in.

I kept running at the highest pace I could maintain in the wood. I covered a lot of ground and I was probably kilometers from my men now.

Judging by the increase in her smell and my pace, she was probably walking, which explained why I was catching on, the track being a few hours old now.

It was not a well-traveled path. I was far in the woods and the mountain, it was hard to believe someone would travel here. A little further, there were some paths that would be far easier to travel. Was she lost, or was this deliberate?

The word of Sam resonated in my head.

What if this is a trap?

Was someone trying to get me away from civilization, from my men, from any resources or backup.

I should slow down, think about this, but my feet didn’t seem to connect with my mind. I kept running.

There was now the growing sound of water. Another stream? A river? Had she walked deliberately into the water to erase her tracks? The stream had been small, easy to cross, so why risk getting her feet wet far in the woods, otherwise? Then was she doing the same thing here? Would I lose her smell again? The tracks were probably minutes old at best now. Would I lose her now that I’m so close?

The sun was not visible anymore, the orange glow slowly turning to midnight blue.

I was running out of time.

Even with my wolf eyes, my vision was getting limited in the thick forest.

I was close, I knew it.

I suddenly stopped.

If she was hiding her scent, she didn’t expect to meet someone so far in the forest. I had run relatively silently, but at this pace, I would have sounded like an elephant to anyone with heightened senses. I slowed my trek to a walk, silent, undetectable. The wind was coming from behind me, no one would get my scent.

As I got closer to the river, the forest cleared, the wind pick up speed, and I smelled her just before I could see her.

There was this light exotic flower smell again, but it was richer now, softer, it reminded me of playing in the dead colourful maple leaf on the autumn ground as a child, of the feeling of strawberry juices running on your tongue, of a stormy night of April, of a warm blanket in front of a fire in the dead of winter, of the silkiness of a woman's skin on mine, and there she was.

A dark outline, barely visible at the edge of my vision, but I knew it was her.

She was maybe fifty meters from the river.

Because of the large rocks ahead, she probably couldn't see it and was guided by the sound.

I picked up speed, still silent. She was headed to the river. It was not a large or deep river. She could probably walk through easily, maybe even up or down the river. I could see the faint undulations of water moving around rocks that were close to the surface.

A few minutes more, and I would've probably lost her for good.

As I got close enough, I slowed my pace, not to jump on her, and I deliberately made my steps audible. I doubted sneaking on her was a great strategy, especially given the effort she was making to stay away from anyone.

I saw her shape tensed on the third step. She heard me.

She was wearing dark clothes—pants, and something with a hood covering her head.

She was probably five-six or five-seven.

She turned around slowly, carefully.

She stopped as her eyes landed on me. Her breathing accelerated.

I got closer.

She took a step back, so I stopped. Her breathing was still picking up speed and she put a hand on her chest.

She was probably feeling that same pang I was feeling. This tightness as if gravity as doubled only not on my skin, just my organs.

I raised one foot to get a little closer. She raised a hand, palms up, stopping me.

So I did.

"What are you doing to me?" she whispered, confused.

What did she mean? As another rush of wind brought her smell to me once more, I understood.

She couldn't smell me. She probably could barely see me in the growing darkness, especially at this distance, she could feel something, she just didn't know what this meant.

I dug in my pocket and took out a black bandana, I took a pebble on the ground and wrapped the bandana around it to give it mass, then I showed it to her, and threw it her way.

Her body language was that of confusion, but she caught it.

It took maybe three seconds for her to get the smell to her nose, and her body became a pure statue.

I looked patiently, and waited for her to process the information. It took a little while, but she took the bandana closer to her nose and inhale deeply.

Her cowl rose back to facing me.

She understood.

She knew.

— Chapter Four —

UNTIL DAWN

— Kaden —

I took a careful step in her direction.

She didn't try to stop me this time.

I took another step, then another.

I could see she was hesitant, so I walked cautiously, but I kept walking.

I think she only processed my proximity when I got within arm's length. She put a foot back, I stopped. She extended her arms to give me back my bandana. I took it and in the process my skin touched hers.

It was like a lightning bolt of shivers. I didn't take my hand away. I wasn't sure I could. I heard her breath caught in her throat, her body sway lightly towards mine. I took one step closer. One long step that got our bodies nearly touching. My hand was still on hers, the bandana forgotten and lying on the grass now.

The moon was rising, it was a bright night tonight, but not bright enough to see within that hood. It was just shadows.

I wanted to ask her a million questions. Her name, to see her face, where did she live? But all those questions crumbled in my mind. It was like trying to hold water in your hands, constantly slipping away. I should use restrains but my body didn't want to listen to me. I lowered my head barely catching myself in time, barely holding back. But in respond she bent hers back, and it was all the invitation I need.

I lowered my head further and pressed my lips on hers.

I've kissed a woman before, I've done plenty of things with a woman before, but it felt like, all these years, I had no idea what kissing could really be. There was, at this very moment, and entire universe opening before me.

The only way for me to release my hold on her hand was to wrap my arms around her waist.

She mewled and it was the sweetest little sound I've ever heard. I pressed her harder against me and her arms went up over my body to give her fingers access to my hair. Her grip was strong but not painful and she tugged at me to deepen the kiss. Which I willingly obliged.

We were taking short breaths in between caresses. Our lips never truly apart. Our breath intermingling. Our heartbeats deafening.

The intensity was such that it took me a little while to realize something was wrong.

— Elaeya —

My heart was becoming painful, my feet faltered. I was starting to think I was about to be sick. I opened my sense to decipher what was happening to me. That's when a sound got me out of my head and back into reality.

Steps.

Someone was coming. Someone close.

And suddenly my malaise took a whole new dimension. Was someone doing this to me? Was someone hurting me? Attacking me?

I tried to extend my senses further do detect this assailant.

I turned and easily saw the large figure close by. Too close. How did it get so close?

It was male. Definitively male. Broad shoulders. I would say more than a foot taller than me. He had dark clothes, dark hair. The faint dusk light gave me a glimpse of his face. He had a few days old stubble. He was made of hard lines and square jaw.

He moved towards me, looking straight at me with purpose and the pain in my chest intensified.

I took a step back in alarm and he stopped.

I could hardly see his expression, so I couldn't guess at his intentions, but I feared the worst.

He stepped towards me once more and I panicked, raising one hand to tell him to back off. My left. The one for protection.

"What are you doing to me?" I dared ask.

He tilted his head to one side in confusion.

I saw him sniff slowly the air then get his attention more focused on me.

He then took a piece of black cloth out and went down to grab a small rock. I didn't understand this gesture. I focused my eyes on him, opening my senses up, but my instincts said nothing. He wrapped the cloth around the pebble, showed it to me and threw it in a slow, wide arc.

More confused than ever, I caught it.

Should I refrain from touching it. I didn't feel any magic, any energies stirring when he did this. I didn't sense negative energy from the cloth or the stone.

I didn't dare take my attention completely off him, but I turned my focus some. And I got a smell. A new smell. It wasn't strong olfactory speaking, but it grabbed my full attention.

I couldn't stop myself from inhaling the fragrance, deeply.

I didn't understand right away what I was smelling, only that it changed everything.

I got my eyes back on him. I couldn't see his eyes, like he probably couldn't see mine, but I know our gaze met. And there was knowledge there. He knew, and now so did I. I had a mate.

I heard very few tales of mates, and most not good ones. My father said a little to me, when my mother wasn't around, that most wolves valued mates more than anything. Some could go to great lengths to find their mates. That rejections were rarely done. That it had an impact on someone's life that had very little equals in the world.

He said, for him, the only pull as strong had been to hold me for the first time after I was born. That it's like the world tilts, the axis changes, and now gravity find a new source. Never did those words make any sense as much as now. I thought I understood him, but I clearly didn't.

My mind didn't understand the stranger was coming closer until I could finally see his face properly. His eyes were dark and searching for mine.

This attraction was so strong that it scared me. I wanted to bolt but I could barely move my feet. But he stopped moving. I could see he was worried. His expression was hard to read, it was guarded, but I could also see that he didn't want to stop. I didn't want him too either, and it scared me even more.

I had thought for a moment I could have been poisoned or cursed when I first laid eyes on him. Now I understood he was himself a poison far deadlier than anything I could have ingested. All of a sudden, the cloth in my hand felt like it was burning.

I tried to give it back to him, but it got worse.

I was neglectful. I let our skin touch, never realizing the lethal potential something so simple could have.

My body was not my own anymore, and neither was my mind, and as he grew closer—his heat palpable through my clothes—I could only lean into it in eagerness.

I thought I had lost my mind, but never so much as when he kissed me.

He looked like a strong man, one to be careful around. I could distantly feel a strength emanating from it, it should have been a warning. Something for me to be wary of. Not something to seek. Not something to embrace. Not someone to throw myself at in pure abandon.

I had never been one to be so reckless, so impulsive. I knew restraint and control. But not tonight, not anymore. And the enchanting attraction of that kiss only lured me in deeper.

We were probably both out of control, the temptation irresistible.

My hand brushed accidentally against something metallic, that took me by surprise, and I tried with all my might to focus on it instead. Like someone drowning in rapids, trying to hold on to the rocks. I needed a rock for my mind. Something to keep my head out of these intoxicating waters.

The thing was a hilt. I didn't need to see it to know it was that of a sword. And next to it was another weapon, I didn't need to touch to know either. It was a rifle. He had weapons on him.

I focused on that knowledge harder.

He was armed and I knew dangerous.

And I was just there kissing him.

It took me everything to lower my right hand until it lay on his heart.

We needed to gain back control.

I felt like I was on the verges of insanity. I had opened up before he came to me, I wanted to know what was going on. But I should have never done this. Not facing a mate. It had been impulsive and unwise and now I was paying the price.

I was unable to close my mind now. So I took everything that I had and put it in the palm of my hand. Every last scrap of free will, and I pushed. The gesture obviously weak, but I pushed some more—the rest of my body not acting in accordance with this, at all.

I thought I would lose this battle when I felt him falter, hesitate.

I only pushed further until he took a step back. I took two.

I closed my eyes and turned from him, and put all the effort I could muster into closing my mind and rebuilding my mental shields.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

His voice was a low rumble. I could hear worry in it.

My body was slightly bent forward. I breathed deeply, trying to steady myself. I put one hand back behind me in warning to stay away. He didn't step any closer and waited patiently.

As I straightened my body, I began a process of fact assessment. The best thing I ever found to fight overwhelming feelings is facts.

One, he was a werewolf. I had no doubt. Two, he was armed. Three, he was strong. Four, he was dangerous. Five, there was a battle in these woods tonight. Six, I was late, really late.

I turned back to him with more certainty this time, but before I could say anything, there was a beeping in his pocket.

He took out his phone and as he looked at it, worry lines were painted on his face.

He looked at me sharply.

“I can’t stay,” he said it like it has cost him a limb. “I need to go.”

“So do I,” I answered.

He grew tense, his heartbeats frantic.

“Can you wait for me?” There was pleading in his voice. It somehow dug in my soul.

“I’m late,” I said.

His breathing accelerated. He looked at his phone then at the woods behind him, then back at me.

“This can’t be the end.” He stepped a little closer. I backed up, afraid to lose control again. He froze. “Please, just a little longer.”

I don’t know why I said what I said then. I just knew this was to be said, and it hurt to think of all the possible repercussions these simple words could have. But I said them nonetheless.

“You have until dawn.”

He gave me one sharp nod in thanks and bolted in the direction he came from.

— Chapter Five —

I'M ONLY A MAN

— Kaden —

Fuuuuuuuuuck!

The battle was already underway. I was supposed to lead this. I started this. And there was a girl ready to bolt, right there in the middle of the woods, and I couldn't do shit.

Dawn.

That was one hell of a deadline.

I took my boots off after I got back in the woods, far away from her so that she wouldn't see—I didn't want to freak her out anymore that she already was—I partially shifted and used this to move faster, jumping over any precarious terrain and going at full speed.

I got my earpiece in and got the rundown from David.

He seemed like he wanted to ask about where the hell I had been but I didn't let him ask and just kept him busy answering all my questions so that I knew exactly what I was getting into.

It took figurative ages.

I knew when I was getting closer as the forest sounds got quieter. The cicadas stopped singing, there were no birds or bats, the usual songs of the forest died down and slowly was replaced by the rhythm of war. It started by the distant sharp echoes of gunshots that reverberated through the night. And as I came closer, the occasional growling of wolves ferociously tearing at their opponents. I could see distant flashes further into the trees. Guns and flash bangs were the main light sources, but the occasional light show of magic could also be seen.

The artifacts, I assumed.

I used the strength of my wolf's paws to propel myself in the air. I pick my handgun in one hand and my sword in the other, and took in the biggest gulp of air my lungs could.

As I landed on the ground in the midst of combat, I let out the loudest roar I was capable of.

The ground shook beneath me, trees trembled, and the people closest to me lost balance and fell. Many found themselves taking a few steps back from the auditory assault, and before anyone could gain back their footing, I was already charging in.

I could go on in detail about various fighting tactics and maneuvers. About how I defeated enemies.

Movies love to glorify battles, to depict warriors as heroes, show the glory of victory. But there is nothing glorious in violence, there is no heroism in destruction, there is no honour, no bravery, no true victory in warfare.

War is savage and untamable. It is pure destruction. You don't build an empire on destruction. You don't save the weak, or protect your own. You just destroy. The rest either come before or after.

I don't take joy into battle. I can't say there isn't any time where I feel elation, because there is. But to me, this is a means to an end. I do what I have to, to achieve something.

I have come to realise that there is a danger to being in a position of power like mine. Normally people desire power to be able to achieve certain things. They want more money to feed themselves and their family. They want to rise in the rank of an organisation, to be able to do more. But the more you gain, the more the line between actions and goals blurs, the more the order of things becomes unclear. And soon enough, those who sought money to be able to care for others, now take care of others to gain more money, those you sought rank to be able to pose actions now pose action to gain rank. It's not so bad until the new goal doesn't align with the former. When the best way to get money is not by taking care of other, but using them instead.

It sounds like very little difference, and it is in the life of every day people, but to someone like me. Who, like tonight, holds hundreds of lives in my hands, this simple shift in goals could have repercussions far beyond my own life. I got burnt a few times. I got into this too young. I had very little insulation built upon experience. I made mistakes. I saw good people get hurt. I saw what was left in the wake of my mistakes.

So now, every battle, every life I take, I try to remember.

I'm not always as successful as I'd like to be. I don't always manage to reach the detachment for the unfolding events as I'd like. In the end, I guess, I'm only a man.

There is a sort of absurd peace to battle. You hear the noises and the chaos, but at the same time, there is this overwhelming quiet that is overcoming all your senses. There is a simplicity in the gestures, the movements, the choices. There is no deeper meaning, or social pleasantries or protocols—just cause and effect. One gun shot, one wound, then you move on. It has a rhythm, like a travesty of a mantra leading you in this altered state of mind, where the most animalistic part of yourself takes over. Where your instinct guides you. Where your conscious mind takes a backseat, gathering information and letting the unconscious lead the way.

When you've seen enough battles, when you trained often enough, you can let the movements guide you, barely directing them.

But tonight, I couldn't reach the calmness I usually feel.

I had a mate, and I was getting out of time.

The enemy's use of magical artifacts, their strategies and weapons inventories, has forced us to have to fold many times.

Normally, I would embrace such tactics. We were well trained. We could wait them out, let them exhaust themselves. Many face battles like a sprint. Some can be excellent sprinters. A fight can be a sprint, but a battle is more like a marathon, and my men are absolutely great marathoners. Sprinters can't last long in a marathon. Even if their magical forces were too much for us, or their armoury too great, or their numbers too vast. Chances were that if we played our cards well, we could keep them at bay long enough to let them tire themselves, and then we would be in the advantageous position. The roles reversed. We could be victorious.

Tonight, the deck didn't seem stacked too hard against us, but our forces were not as overwhelming as they could have been. Which meant a cautious approach was the best way to keep injuries and death to a minimum.

I've prided myself in keeping casualties to the lowest point possible. In the last ten battles, only one has had a death, just one—the others had nothing more than injuries, none permanently crippling.

This speaks volumes of both the strength of my men, but also the careful approach we have taken, and the consequent effect of this. I valued my men, they were never cannon fodder to me.

But tonight, this care could cost me my mate, and probably, in the future, my life. Was my life, my future more valuable than my men. My reason said obviously not. But there was a small part of me that was rebelling for the first time. A part that didn't want to be a leader, that didn't want to put others above myself, and that for once, wanted to be selfish.

Was it wrong of me to want to care for myself first, for once?

Or course not, but could I afford this, could I live with the consequences later.

I've never been a man of compromises. So I guided my men into safe maneuvers, and I alone slipped through the woods to attack the rear on my own. This is not a safe strategy. This is not a sane strategy. But I had left my sanity by that river.

I needed to take this chance.

And if one had to pay the price of my recklessness, then it would be me.

— Elaeya —

I could sense the wail of the hills under the weight of battles. It was far, but not far enough.

I should have been back by now.

We were supposed to be gone already. I had been late from the beginning. How did I let myself be dragged into this? One minute earlier, and I would have been gone before he even arrived.

What were they thinking now?

That I'd been hurt? That something tragic had happened? They were probably looking all over for me, and I was here, looking at the stars, sitting on a rock by the river.

I spent a while, torn. Should I stay, or should I leave? I walked a little further, where the trees were thicker, where my presence would be harder to detect. At the very least, I should not expose myself to danger anymore that I've already done.

I don't know why I gave him time. Maybe it was the desperation in his voice. Maybe it was the desperation in my mind. Or maybe it was just meant to be.

I closed my eyes and breathed in slow, nothing about this felt wrong, but my mind kept arguing with the feeling. My mind wasn't always in harmony with my instincts. But in the end, I gave my word. I may not have sworn any oath, but it was a bond and I had to respect it. My mind told me to run, but my body told me to relax and wait. That all would come to an end soon.

That the time was about to come.

I had to be ready.

— Chapter Six —

THE COLOUR OF FROZEN RASPBERRIES

— Kaden —

“What the hell has gone into you?” asked Ylva behind me.

I felt her foot land somewhere on my buttocks. Everyone around us cleared up. There aren’t many people who’d dare kick my ass, literally, without expecting severe retaliation.

No one wanted to become collateral in what was about to happen.

I turned around ready to tell her about respecting her superior in a very brutal way, but when I saw her with her left hand pressed hard against her bleeding stomach I changed my mind immediately.

“What happened?” I asked her.

“Some idiot had the brilliant idea to charge on his own at the enemy. Without back up. So I took care of it.”

“I never asked you to do this. I said to keep ranks.”

“You also said no man on his own.”

“Not tonight.”

“What changed then?”

I wasn’t sure how to answer this, but David saved me.

“Man, I thought we’d be at it for longer than this.” He said coming my way, walking over the leftovers of the battle.

Ylva looked at me askance.

I ignored her.

“Every man accounted for?” I asked him.

Ylva growled in frustration at me and left.

“The preliminary counts seem so, but the official numbers should be out soon.”

I nodded and swept the place with my eyes one last time before I looked at the sky. It was slowly brightening.

“I guess the plane is gonna leave soon?” asked David.

“I can’t ask a small pack like Monaweard to feed and care for all my men.”

“Right,” he acquiesced. “Do you think I could ask for a ride home? I’ve been away for too long.”

“Sure, no problem, I’ll send a message to the pilot.”

I took my phone and did just that. I looked at the time, nervously. It would be tight.

“Pick everything and the men, we should evacuate this place as fast as we can,” I told him.

“Sure,” he said, looking at me questioningly.

Sam came towards me, and I moved to join him, away from prying ears. David left to help clean up. Men were already slowly packing up. A few, carrying the injured. Others had gone, per my order, to raid whatever Nubinero had brought with them. A series of artifacts had already been secured. Their survivors captured.

“As meeting your mate gone to your head?” Sam asked in a half-whisper that didn’t mask the scorn he felt towards me.

“No,” I said running my hand down my face, I felt wetness and when I looked at my hand, it was covered in blood. That was not ideal. “She’ll wait for me until sunrise,” I told him exasperated.

“This is pretty close to now,” he said.

“I know,” I said. “I have to go.”

“You look like you’ve been chainsawing bloody meat all night.”

It wasn’t a bad analogy. “I’ll need to clean up.”

“I’m not an expert in women, but I’m pretty sure, even Ylva would not tolerate blood as an aftershave.”

“No, she wouldn’t,” I said.

“You told her?”

“Ylva?” I asked. “I don’t even know what’s gonna happen with my mate.”

“How did it go?”

“I didn’t have the time to even get her name, or see her face. I don’t know how I did, I’ll answer this after I’ve gotten back. Get the words to the others to pack everything, the plane is leaving as soon as it can. We’ll need better medical attention for the injured and we don’t have supply for days here.”

“What about you?” he asked me.

“I’ll update you when I can,” I told him and left.

He didn’t try to stop me this time.

I had a bag at camp and went to grab it, then went to the small clearing I'd found earlier and followed my own tracks to the small stream. I was far from people, so I didn't bother with modesty and undressed. I cleaned up all the blood that I could, then put on some fresh clothes.

It was not perfect, it wasn't as efficient as a shower, and without soap, I could only take so much of the smell off of me.

Once done, I unloaded my bag and weapons at camp and left in a hurry.

I ran again as fast as I could. The sun had not peaked through yet, the moon was still visible, the midnight blue of the sky slowly turning into a clouded gray, still dark enough to make me careful of my steps in the woods.

The trek was barely easier than last time, knowing better where to go and with a clearer scent to follow, but at the same time, I was tired. It had been a long day and a long night. I had tried to take a nap in the afternoon, knowing of the long night ahead, but responsibilities had taken over my life once more, and I was now paying the price.

I tried not to let this slow me. I had the feeling if I went pass this deadline, I might not be able to get a second chance.

By the time I reached the vicinity of the river, the sky had brightened some more. Today would probably be a cloudy day. The clouds were getting thicker now and I couldn't see if the moon was still there, or if the sun had finally risen.

I slowed my steps as I approach the place I'd last seen her.

She wasn't there.

For a second, my heartbeats peaked and my breathing became erratic.

I messed up.

It took maybe five seconds for my reason to tell me to calm down and pick up her scent.

I took a few long breaths then went to track her.

It didn't take me long to find her scent. It was edging towards the water. I forced myself to calm down and keep following the scent. Unless I would lose it at the waters edge, then it was not over. And to my relief her tracks went between some large boulders and the water, moving further.

After maybe a minute, I found myself in a thicket of trees, she was sitting on a rock near the edge. Her shape dark in the growing light. But she was there. I looked at the sky, I could see a bright shape under the clouds. We were past dawn. But still, she was there.

I cleared my throat.

She didn't turn right away, but she didn't jump either. I'd kept my steps audible to help with that. After a few heartbeats, she turned around, her head low, she moved down that rock and came to me.

She seemed far calmer than the last time I'd seen her, though I still couldn't see her face hidden deep under her hood.

"You waited for me?" I told her.

She nodded.

"The sun is up," I noticed.

"It is," she said. Her voice was soft, melodic.

I didn't know what to say. 'Come with me?' It sounded terrible even to me.

She turned her head towards the direction I came from. "There is a battle," she noted.

"Was," I corrected her.

She turned her attention back to me. "You were there."

I couldn't tell if it was a question or an observation. "I was."

"I can smell blood on you."

I nodded. There's nothing I can say that could make this sound any better.

She took a slow step towards me. I didn't move.

"You smell of death," she told me.

"I probably do," I admitted.

"Who are you?"

"Someone from far away." I didn't know how else to describe myself without freaking her out.

She nodded as if this meant more than it said.

I took one step towards her.

"I need to go now," she told me.

"Where?" I asked.

"We should have left this place already."

We?

"To where?"

"South America."

I had spent years going back and forth in South America. I had no plan of going back soon. If she'd left a little earlier, I would probably have never met her.

"Why?" I asked.

"It is far," she said simply.

"Are you running from something?"

She shook her head.

"Who is with you?" I asked.

"My parents. We were supposed to meet hours ago. They must be worried now."

"They must be," I admitted. "What is your name?" I took another step towards her.

"Elaeya."

"I'm Kaden." I took one last step, we were close now, but the light was mostly behind us and I still couldn't see her face.

I raised a hand to pull her hood back, but when my fingers brushed inadvertently against her cheek, a lightning bolt went through my nervous system, I instinctively pressed my hand fully against her skin, the sensation both euphoric and addictive.

In response, she bent her head backwards and I took it as an invitation. I bent my neck down to brush my lips against hers.

She mewled softly against my breath, and it only intensified the desire. I cupped my other hand against her other cheek, holding her face to mine.

She snaked her hands in response against my chest, clawing at the fabric.

I moved my hand deeper under her hood, letting it fall backwards. Her hair was wrapped in a low bun held by a single pin. I pulled on it instinctually and glided my fingers through her mane. I don't remember ever touching anything this soft. I lost myself in the movements, from the back of her head, to the back of her neck, to her cheeks and jawline—all the while covering her lips with mine in slow sensuous motions.

Her hands by then had found my neck, her finger delicate, the gesture velvety against my skin.

I opened my eyes slowly. The light brighter now, but still subdued. It was at an angle enough to draw the contours of her face, and shine through her eyes.

I pulled back.

Those eyes.

I never saw eyes like these.

The line that circled her irises was the colour of frozen raspberries, but the center was of the palest pink—like the colour you see on the cheeks of a child coming back from playing in the snow—a light blush. Her skin was devoid of any imperfections that I could find, even from this close, and had this shimmering texture, refracting the modest light in a faint glow. And her hair was of pure white.

I don't know what I expected to see, but my heart faltered as I took in the sight of her. Her features were delicate and perfect. No one can be this perfect.

She swallowed as I kept looking at her, entranced.

"I really need to go now." Uncertainty grew upon her face.

"I can come," I suggested.

I thought she would shake her head at me, but she looked in my eyes instead, searching for I don't know what. I was half-afraid she might find something she shouldn't and leave.

After an eternity that lasted maybe a few seconds, she nodded.

— Chapter Seven —

THE PATH THAT WAS LAID FOR ME

— Elaeya —

I was walking back towards camp with a complete stranger in tow. I didn't know who he was, nor what he wanted, all that I knew is that I consented to this. Again. Twice in so few hours, I did something I would not have expected of myself.

I took slow deep breaths opening slowly my senses and instincts—but not open enough to face the kind of uncontrollable urges I have felt when first we met.

Nothing from my instincts told me that I was in danger, or doing the wrong thing. Actually, I was getting very little at all. What I did get was that I was walking in the right direction, and that nothing should be altered. So I kept going.

We walked mostly in silence.

I didn't know what to say. What do you say to a stranger who may have access to your emotions and desires, who can alter the way you feel by his mere presence, who is said to be your future, your life.

I haven't heard that many stories about mates. When I would ask, my mother would simply say they are something to avoid, or nothing worth the effort. But I'd asked my father a few times when mother was away. He told me a little. But now, they would have to tell me more. I needed to know more. I could choose or discard this without understanding what I was choosing or discarding.

But mother wouldn't let me, would she? This would only open profound and powerful wounds.

Were mates so wrong? It didn't feel wrong.

When I closed my eyes, there was a peacefulness I've never experienced before. I may understand very little about it, but never had my instincts guided me wrong.

Everything my senses told me about this man, told me he was dangerous, one to be careful about. From his looks to the permeating scent of blood and death that enveloped him. But it's not what my instincts told me.

So I pushed away my confusion, and like so many times before, followed the path that was laid for me.

— Kaden —

We walked for nearly an hour. We did cross the river and went further up the hills on the other side where the trees were particularly dense.

She was hidden again inside her hood. The clothes she wore, I could see now, were a bit loose and ill-fitting, they were not of great quality and were probably mostly utilitarian in nature.

As we approach a particularly steep section, she raised a hand signaling me to stay behind. She said nothing, and I suspected by her body language, that sound would have given more than she wanted, so I listened and stopped my process.

She climbed the near-vertical cliff beside us with agility. It wasn't that high and she reached the top within more or less twenty seconds.

As I looked up at her, I heard the disturbing sound of a shift. It was brisk, swift. Shifting never really bothered me, but looking up at her, the distance so short, yet I couldn't see what was before her, she was out of reach and I didn't like it.

I took a step towards the cliff, ready to climb when I heard, "Come on up."

It wasn't a normal voice. It wasn't a human voice either. It sounded like human words spoken by vocal cords not shaped for human speech. It sounded more animal than man, but the words were clear enough to be understood.

I didn't hesitate and climbed up swiftly.

She was not too far from the edge of the cliff, looking at a camp.

There were things here that could remind me of camping grounds. But this was way too far from civilization, too purposely hidden, this was not a group of people camping for fun, they were in hiding. But the things strewn here and there got very little of my attention. The beast before me did.

It was huge and dark. When I say huge I mean at least tree or four hundred pounds of muscles, and when I say dark, I mean of the blackest black you can imagine. Most black wolves are not pure black, like me, but more of a deep dark grey. Pure black wolves would probably be a melanistic wolf. But the black of this wolf was much deeper than this. Black surfaces still have some refractivity. This wolf's hair had none. It was like all light got sucked in, just like it would be in a black hole, which made his shape slightly indistinct. Only its teeth and eyes were truly visible. And those eyes were red. Not glowing red obviously, but the deep dark colour of blood.

This wolf had very little in common, with common wolves, just like mine. It was not a wolf I'd be eager to fight. The only thing that came to mind when I looked at it was the stories I heard as a child of demon-wolves.

"Who are you?" it asked.

It talked. It freaking talked. No werewolf I'd ever seen could talk in wolf form. It would require maybe to fully shift, except for the vocal cords, but even then the mouth shape would be problematic, it's pretty hard to speak b's when you don't technically have lips. I don't see how this could be done without magic.

There had been stories, of course, of talking wolves, but they generally were not werewolves. Maybe a wizard using magic to shapeshift, or a variety of supernatural beings, guardian spirits of certain forests, or older gods of some land.

The only thing that ringed true in my head was demon-wolf, again.

“Who are you?” I asked it in return, unwilling to bend.

“He is my father,” said Elaeya. I looked at her in my peripheral.

Well, that was unexpected.

Maybe I should be a little more diplomatic. Man, I’ve never been really good at diplomacy. Please, let me not fuck this up.

“My name is Kaden Devon,” I said a little subdued. Just a little.

“Why are you here?” asked this wolf in a gravely rumble. This sounded so alien, I was still trying to wrap my mind around the fact that this can be done. Could I do that? Can this be learned? Is this even a werewolf?

Elaeya smelt of werewolves, but I noticed when I followed her into the woods that this was not all that she smelt. I could not decode what type of mix she was, but she was definitely a hybrid.

The wolf before me smelt werewolf, maybe a little different though. A different breed maybe?

“He is my mate,” she told her father.

His demeanor changed somewhat. He didn’t really move, but the tension in his body shifted.

He kept his eyes on her now. It was like some kind of communication was going on between them.

“What are your instincts telling you?” he asked her.

She hesitated a little, closed her eyes and bend her head a little back. I didn’t understand what was going on, but her father waited patiently. And so I did the same.

“Change is coming,” she finally said, looking at him again.

“Must this be done?” he asked her. I wasn’t sure what they were talking about.

She shook her head. “I don’t know, but something must be done.”

The wolf turned his gaze back to me. “What are your intentions?”

I shrugged.

He growled a bit.

I’m not easily impressed.

"We just met," I explained.

"What are your intentions towards her?"

It gave me a flashback of when I asked the very same thing to Darren.

I sighed. "I'm curious to know who my mate is," I said. "But what will happen will be what she chooses." Translation, this is not your decision but hers, so back off.

"What will you do for her?"

"What kind of question is this?" I threw back at him.

He looked me up and down. "Are you an Alpha?"

There was a weight to this question that seemed to supersede what I understood. Next to me Elaeya tensed.

"I am."

"Where is your pack?" he asked.

"Far from here."

"Why are you here?"

"To help and support allies who were in trouble."

"The battle?" I knew he meant of the one I'd just escaped. It was probably why they were leaving too, I guessed. If they lived in hiding in the woods, battle like these could go in all sorts of directions. It was always safer to stay clear as much as possible.

I nodded.

"You want her to follow you, become your Luna?"

"I don't know. Can she?" I asked him, but turned my gaze to her, truly asking her.

Her eyes fell upon me and it was like she was looking for the answer to this somewhere in my face.

Her father didn't interrupt.

She eventually shrugged. "Maybe," she said softly.

"You need to know better than this," her father told her.

"I know," she said.

"Your mother will be back soon," he said. He took a long breath and exhaled, his eyes closed in weariness. "Three days," he told us. "Three days to know."

"Know what?" I asked confused.

“He is giving us three days to figure out if I should follow you or not?” she explained.

“She will stay in the vicinity, call at dusk and dawn. We lose contact, we come to take her back,” he told me.

I just blinked at him.

“You can refuse,” she told me.

“And then what?” I asked her.

“Then you leave to where you come from, and so do we,” she said.

I tried to stifle a sigh.

Man, why do I keep getting ultimatums?

“Fine,” I said.

“Do you have a phone?” she asked me.

I nodded, she extended her hand and I complied. Gave her my cellphone.

She lit the screen, then showed it to me, away from her for me to put my password in. I don’t generally do this, but I strangely complied.

She opened my message app and sent a text to an unknown number. I heard a beeping near the wolf. His cellphone, I assumed. Then she shared my location, which I was a lot more uncomfortable with. She gave me back my phone, then took a knife from her belt and cut her left hand.

She went to grab a white piece of clothes and wiped both her hand and knife on it, then put it in easy reach of her father before putting the knife back and walking away.

She then slowly climbed down the cliff, and for a few seconds, I was left there dumbfounded and puzzled.

I inclined my head the slightest at the wolf in only farewell and he did the same. Then I went down with her.

— Chapter Eight —

INTO THE ABYSS OF THE UNKNOWN

— Elaeya —

Mother would be able to track me with my blood, no matter how far I'd be. My parents could track his phone, it should be safe.

Yet, these facts didn't lessen the tension in my body. I had never willingly stayed away from my family for more than a day. I knew of no safer place.

Yet I was throwing myself into the abyss of the unknown.

We walked for a while, he took the lead after a little while as I obviously had no idea where we were going.

After maybe thirty minutes of walking, he took his phone out to make a call.

"Yes," answered a tensed female voice from the other end of his phone.

"I'm calling to ask for a favour," he said.

"Whatever you need," the woman said.

"A few days at your pack"

"I can't feed all your men."

"No, I'm sending everyone back. Just me and a few others."

"How many?"

"No more than five."

"Okay, I'll organize accommodations."

"Thank you," he said and hung up without even saying goodbye.

He called another number.

"Yes," said a male voice this time.

"Is the plane ready for take-off?" Kaden asked.

"Within the hour."

"Okay, I'm staying back, tell Sam to get me a vehicle, I'm sending you my position."

He took the phone from his ear and stopped walking for a moment, texting his location.

"Why, where are you?" asked the man.

Kaden took the phone back to his ear. “It doesn’t concern you, I’ll be here for a few more days, I have something to take care of. Jayson will be in charge of the return home. Mariqueen has already been informed. Minimum security, Sam, and you can get one more.”

“Ylva?” the man asked.

“Ylva is injured, she’s getting back home. Find someone else. Then you can give the okay for take-off.” He hung up again, without even ending the conversation, then put the phone back in his pocket.

Well, I suppose pleasantries and politeness are not part of his habits.

We walked for another hour at least. I was really hungry now. I hadn’t eaten for at least twelve maybe fourteen hours. I could obviously go for longer without food, but it didn’t make it easier. I was tired and out of energy. Kaden seemed to suffer from the same, but he said nothing.

His phone rang.

“I’m nearly there, five hundred meters, nine o’clock, I can’t get in deeper,” said a third voice on the phone, male.

“On my way,” Kaden said, hung up, and changed a bit his direction. I followed.

We reached a military hummer painted dark green, with large off-road wheels. A man walked around it to meet us. He was massive and tall. He slowed his pace as his gaze fell on me.

“Mam,” he told me.

I inclined my head politely.

“My name is Sam, I’ll drive you to Monaweard,” he told me, opening the right back door for me. Kaden went on the other side and slid into the backseat, so I complied.

“What is Monaweard?” I asked as Sam took his seat behind the wheel.

“The pack of an ally,” said Kaden to me. “We will stay there for a few days. It’s not far from here.”

I nodded.

The drive was difficult, slow, and bumpy, but within five minutes, Kaden was asleep next to me. I was a little bewildered at this, but before another ten minutes went by, I found myself falling asleep too.

I felt a gentle pressure on my shoulder, and I woke up groggily.

Kaden was the one waking me.

“We’re here,” he said softly.

I wiped at my face and nodded at him. Then got out of the car.

We were parked in front of a beautiful little cottage. It had thick white cob walls and a green roof. The windows had square panes with big planters underneath.

Two men came out of the house, and another circled it from behind to join us.

Further, on the little dirt road that slithered in front of the cottage, another car, compact and lime green came to join us.

I tugged nervously at my hood, drawing it a little further over my face.

Kaden's clothes were different from the one he had worn when I first met him. He had dark blue jeans and a black t-shirt on. He was the most casually dressed of the man. Sam, our driver, and two of the other men wore similar clothes to the ones Kaden wore last night. Black fatigues, steel-toed boots and they had bulletproof vests on top of their shirts. The last man was a lot less muscular than them and came out of the house wearing the remnant of a suit and a smart tablet in his hand. They all looked like they hadn't slept in a while.

"What's the situation?" asked the man in the suit.

"I'll stay here for a few days," said Kaden as the compact car parked beside the Hummer and a beautiful Asian woman came out.

I felt a few eyes on me, and tugged at the hood once more.

"As something happened?" asked the woman coming towards us, before any of the men had had time to ask further questions.

"Nothing serious, don't worry," he told her.

The man in the suit took to his tablet. "There will be a lot of readjustment," he said. "What is the cause?"

"I found my mate," said Kaden.

All eyes turned to me. I tried not to act too nervously, but I lowered my head some. I didn't know any of them. I was taking great risks. Could I even let them see me? What would happen then?

"At the battlefield?" asked the man in a suit, bewildered.

Kaden glared at him.

"Nearby," explained Sam.

"You come from a pack nearby?" the woman asked me gently.

"No," I answered.

"Rogue?" asked the man in the suit.

“Brandon, how about you go back in and take care of that schedule.” Kaden’s voice was rough and severe.

“No,” I said. Better get this out of the way now. “I’m a stray.”

There were a few seconds of silence, and Brandon went back in. From what I know strays are not that common.

“Where is your luggage?” asked the woman.

“I don’t have any,” I said.

“I’ll take care of this,” she said in Kaden and I’s general direction then left to make a call. “Go take a shower sweetie,” she told me, raising her voice. “I’ll get you a change of clothes.”

“You don’t need to,” I said, but she didn’t listen and continued talking on the phone.

“Come,” said Kaden. He went in and I followed.

He moved a bit around, clearly not knowing where everything was, but we landed on the upper floor where there were two bedrooms. Once inside one, he went to the door at the back of the bedroom, opened it, and verified it was a bathroom.

“Here,” he told me. “You can take a shower, take a nap, I’ll be in the other room,” he said gesturing to the only other bedroom on this floor.

“If you don’t mind, I’d like to eat something,” I told him.

He nodded. “I’ll ask for us to get some food ready. You can come down once you’re done,” he said, then left without looking at me any further. He closed the door behind him, leaving me alone.

The room was pretty, in shades of white and pastels. In the bathroom, there was fluffy towels, shampoo, soap, I found new toothbrushes still in their packages behind the vanity mirror. I decided that if I was to have to wait, I might as well wash off.

There was hot water and it was glorious. I left the water wash over my skin, working at the tension, it took me a little while before I began the washing process, just enjoying this luxury to its fullest, but I accelerated as I realized that spending over an hour in the shower might not be the best form, at someone else’s house. Especially if there was food that would wait for me.

There were a few knocks on the bedroom door as I was finishing rinsing.

It took me a little while to finish up and dry myself before I could answer, but I could hear that someone had let themselves in the bedroom.

“Who is it?” I asked with my hand on the doorknob.

“Mariqueen,” said the same woman I had seen before. “I brought you clothes and cosmetics and everything you might need.”

I opened slowly. “It was not necessary,” I said unsure of how to deal with this.

She came to open the door wider then pulled on my arm so that I would follow her in the bedroom. She looked me up and down, then grabbed a few pieces of clothing that were now strewn all over the bed and raised them to my chest, gaging the look, then switching to the next one.

“Consider this a favour. Most men don’t realize how difficult the whole mate thing can be for a woman, and it’s only worst when the mate is an Alpha. Everyone is gonna expect things from you. Take these tips from someone who knows, power in a woman always translates to looks, one way or another. If you don’t look the part, it’s gonna reflect back on you. What do you know so far?” she asked me.

“About what?” I asked, holding to my towel wrapped around my chest.

“About Alpha Devon?” she asked, nodded at a white dress, put it aside and picked white underwear, then gave them to me.

“His name is Kaden Devon, he’s an Alpha and his pack is far from here.”

“And?” she asked. I went back into the bathroom to put the clothes on.

“He fought a battle to help allies. I think that’s it.” He’s also pretty rude when he talks on the phone, but I don’t know what that woman is to him, so I didn’t elaborate on my opinion of him.

“He said nothing else?” she slid the dress through the crack in the door to me, I put it on.

“No.”

She sighed. “I don’t think he’s a big talker, but he should have told you more.”

“Like what?” I asked.

“His pack is Blakemore. It’s a big one. It’s also a strong one. People call him the Hellhound. I don’t know exactly where this name came from, but he’s pretty infamous. I’m the Alpha who called for help. He’s not the most polite man I’ve ever seen, I can tell you that. But I also know that he has principles and he follows them. He also keeps his word, and he probably saved our collective asses.”

I stepped out of the bathroom.

“Are your eyes pink?” she asked me.

“Mmmh,” I said in non-commitment. I folded my clothes on a commode.

“I’ll have this washed.” She told me, then gave me a hairdryer. I think I haven’t used one of those in over a decade.

I turned it on and took care of my wet hair.

She brought some creams and makeup to the small table next to me. Raised a palette next to my face to see which colour fitted, then took away what didn't work.

"You have some strange hair," she told me. "Want type of hybrid are you?"

"Is it important?" I asked her.

"Not to me," she said truthfully.

Once I was done with my hair, I took the make-up.

She extended a hairbrush at me.

"I don't need it," I said.

She frowned and got up. She glided the brush through my hair once, then her finger.

"No knots," she noted.

I shook my head. I didn't put in foundation, I didn't need any, and she probably had nothing that would look natural on me either. I used mostly neutral colours, a bit more on the eyes and lips. I haven't used makeup often. I know how to do it, it's just that I don't have access to cosmetics often.

"Never?" she asked about my hair.

"It never knots."

"This is the most impressive superpower I've ever seen," she said shaking her head. She flicked some of my hair up and looked at it fall down in fascination.

"Are you a real stray or you just said that to shut them up?" she asked sitting on the bed.

"I've never been part of any pack," I said.

She nodded. "Your parents are rogues or lone wolf?"

"They're not rogues, so I suppose they qualify as lone wolves."

"Why never in a pack?"

I shrugged. I put everything down and got up. I waved my arms at her asking 'is this decent?' About my looks.

"You're gonna blow everyone's mind. White really suits you. It's probably because of the hair."

I felt exposed. The dress was light and sleeveless, at least it covered my legs.

"There are not many women Alpha, aren't there?" I asked.

"No. Technically, the couples are supposed to be both Alpha, but for some reason, women are called Luna and treated differently. Beta couples are both called Betas, I don't see why the

distinction with women Alphas. It's probably a power thing." She selected some clothes and but them in a drawer for me, I helped her folding them. "That why I made sure no one would take that title from me," she told me.

"How?" I asked her.

"I made my mate Beta," she said with a smile.

"I don't believe that's very conventional."

"It isn't, but my pack is really small. It's a bit pointless to have a bunch of rank members. So my husband and I are it. But I'm in charge."

I smiled at her.

"Whatever happens down there, don't let them walk all over you," she told me.

"Don't worry, it's harder to do that one would think."

"Good."

— Chapter Nine —

THE WILDER ELEMENTS OF OUR KIN

— Kaden —

The other bedroom also had an en-suite bathroom, which was convenient, so I used it, careful to wash all remnants of blood from my scent. Sam had brought my luggage up, so I changed and went down.

I smelled the food first.

There were a couple of domestic cooking—probably not Omegas as this pack was probably too small to have any, they might not even be domestics either—and my stomach rumbled loudly. I had told everyone to wash up. I didn't want a bunch of men smelling of blood and whatever other gory things to scare her off, and I also asked them to dress casually and keep their weapons to anything small and easy to hide.

I was not exactly surprised by the fact she was a stray, but it didn't make the situation any easier either. Adapting to a new pack is not always easy, but doing so when you have no idea how packs operates is even more complex. On the upside, she probably won't compare Blakemore to other packs, as she doesn't have much to compare with.

I also ordered my men to keep things under wrap about Elaeya. In a couple of days, I could go back home on my own, so starting the rumour mill too soon, might not be the brightest of ideas.

The house wasn't really big. There were two small bedrooms downstairs with a couple of single beds, a small kitchen, living room. And there was a glass extension—more modern than the rest of the house—where there was a table and a series of wicker chairs.

I was afraid the thing would fall under my weight, but it held strong. The guys came in a little after me. We were all tired, but we were even more famished.

The moment Brandon sat next to me, he pulled his tablet and started asking questions about the proper disposition of the artifacts we'd acquired, and how to deal with what was left of Nubinero on their territory.

I was tired and wanted him to drop it, but I also knew from experience that this had to be taken care of rapidly. So I had him contact the Moonhunter Brotherhood about Nubinero, and relay with my father about the artifacts. Jayson, my Beta, was probably in bed now, or so I hoped. So I gave him a break.

The food came maybe fifteen minutes later, which shut Brandon up for a while.

Elaeya still wasn't there. I know Mariqueen went to her to get her clothes, so I supposed everything was okay.

The sky was still dark and gray, and it was now raining. The water droplets hitting on the glass pane above our head in a gentle rhythm.

I smelled her before she walked in. I put my fork down and looked around.

Her feet were bare on the wood floor. She had a long dress, in a fabric so thin I could see her silhouette through. There was a band of strings artfully knotted that belted under her breast and two triangles of fabric going from her chest to behind her neck, leaving her back bare. What I'd thought I saw of her face in that dark forest was a travesty of her real beauty. Her hair was long, all the way to her upper thighs and flowing with every movement as if gravity was not affecting it the same way it affected everything else. And the tip of her hair went from white, to a pale shade of pink, fading into darker tones, all the way to black. I don't think a dye job can be this smooth or natural.

Every man in the room had frozen, except Stellan who was on his feet for some reason—getting up as a reflex and froze with his bite halfway to his mouth, falling from his fork and splattering in his plate. I think Brandon completely forgot to breathe. I made an effort not to look as stupid as any of them, and I wasn't sure how successful I was. But I did manage to kick Anders under the table beside me, so he'd get up and let her sit there. Sam pulled at Stellan's arm and made him sit back.

When Brandon finally inhaled, most of the food that was still in his mouth went down his windpipe at the same time, and he started coughing.

Sam pulled the chair beside me for her, and she complied.

Her expression was hard to read. I don't know if she was shy, or uncomfortable, but there were some emotions there that didn't make me feel great and I had no idea what to do about this.

She wore no jewelry except for two identical silvery bracelets, with what looked like a crystal on her inner wrists.

She sat in silence, and the breakfast rhythm resumed slowly.

We all ate rather quickly. No one made small talk. We were all exhausted, and Elaeya's presence cut down on a lot of it. I can't say I didn't enjoy the silence, because I did.

Once we were done, I clapped my hands once and ordered everyone to bed. I walked Elaeya to her room, inclined my head once in farewell, and went to my room to catch some Z's of my own.

I fell asleep nearly instantly, but awakened only an hour later. For the next four hours, I went through a cycle of sleep and awake every half hour. I was getting tired of this, but before my frustration really got the best of me, my phone rang.

"Yeah," I mumbled.

"Did I wake you, son?" my father asked.

I grumbled, then sighed and got up. "Can't really sleep," I admitted.

"We're having a few issues," he told me.

"Of course, we're having issues. When do we ever not have issues?" I whined angrily.

"Well, someone clearly got up on the wrong side of the bed."

"I'm starting to wonder if I'm ever gonna get a single day off."

"Since when do you ask for days off?"

"Since now," I growled.

My father moved around and closed a door. "Are you sick?" he asked worried.

"I'm fine," I exhaled. "What is this about?"

"The Brotherhood."

The Moonhunter Brotherhood had been created a few centuries ago. They were a bit of a weird bunch. As human society grew, werewolves had to better organize to make sure everything would work without a hitch. On the other side of things, the supernatural world had always been a little bit touch and go, especially with humans, but the rise of organized religions, the evolution of centralized governance, and little issues like the Spanish Inquisition and a few other human vendettas against our kind, did create a desire for most supernatural forces to unite under more structured banners. A lot of pacts were created between various preternatural realms, but werewolves had always had this sort of tribal structure to it. There was like a gajillion different packs, and as the population went up, we needed a unifying structure. The Brotherhood became it for us. It became the organization who would deal directly with other supernatural nations, they would also install some code of conduct amongst us and control the wilder elements of our kin.

Anyone could create a pack, but it would not be a legitimate pack until it received approbation by the Brotherhood. They also established rules to interact and most of all settle disputes between packs in a civilized way.

Things like declaring open war was generally not a good way to make friends with the brotherhood. Creating a pack made of other packs was also another way not to make friends with them. I'm not a Brotherhood favorite, let's just agree to that.

Nevertheless, whenever they had a situation on their hands, they loved calling on me to help settle things. Every member was required to answer if the Brotherhood called upon them. Being one of the strongest members, when the situation was particularly dicey, it was nearly

guaranteed they would call upon me. But I was also strong enough to challenge them when they made decisions I didn't like, which is why most Brothers kept me out of the loop as much as they could afford, and I got most of my information, either through obligatory mail to members, or from a few key allies.

Mostly, I tried not to get involved too much. I stayed out of their way, and they stayed out of mine. It was our non-verbal agreement.

Under Brotherhood laws, my war with Nubinero was absolutely justified through the kidnapping and attempted murder of my sister, the murder of Mads, and their attack on an ally. In that regard, Alpha Murphy has made it clear he was in full support of my decision, and as I was the one who had regained his pack for him, would be stupid to deny me support. Plus, our relationship with Ghealach has grown ever since.

And of course, this only added to the discomfort this situation gave to the Brotherhood.

Most packs would have asked official authorization before making a move. I just sent them a letter informing them of the situation around an hour before Nubinero received their package with my war declaration.

It hasn't been unheard of from the Brotherhood to either have info leaks, or have them going behind other's back and try to resolve this differently. Which would have included a lot of back and forth, and a lot of ass-kissing.

I hate ass-kissing.

Once I'd said what I needed to say, I still allowed talks, so it's not like I didn't allow any form of diplomacy.

"What do they want this time?" I asked my father.

"It's the artifacts. I think some of them think you started this to get your own little collection, and now they're getting on your ass about it," he told me.

"Of course they are." Now I'm the bad guy.

Great.

— Chapter Ten —

ALL THE WAY TO YOUR SOUL

— Elaeya —

I got up in the afternoon.

The sky was still grey, and it was hard to tell the time of the day.

There was tension in the air I could not originate. I knew I would not be able to sleep much longer, so I got up. I could hear a voice booming from below, muffled by various walls and doors. I left my room and went downstairs.

There was no movement in the house. Except for that voice, and typing on a keyboard.

I found the source of the typing in the dining room.

He was still wearing his suit.

“What is your name?” I asked him.

He jumped to his feet, nervous. “Brandon,” he told me.

“I’m Elaeya.”

He inclined his head nervously. “Is there anything I can do for you Mam?” he asked me.

I shook my head. “Sorry for my intrusion. I will let you work.”

He nodded again and sat back at the table, to focus on his laptop and papers.

Kaden was outside. The rain had stopped and left a sheet of water drops on the ground around him. He was pacing with his cellphone to his hear.

“No. We’re not sending them anything. We will track the former owners, and they can help us with that, and we will return everything to the rightful owners. Anything else, we keep until we decide what to do with those,” he said into the receiver.

I took a look in the kitchen and found a few pomegranates on the counter. I took one that I opened up to eat.

“How many times had there been leaks? I don’t trust them any farther than I can kick them,” said Kaden. “We got information about Greysky and Akayume. Dig into that and they should too. If they moved into trafficking or any of that bullshit, they might become a problem soon enough.” He was a little too far for me to hear what the other person was saying on the phone. “I never kissed their asses, I’m not gonna start now. They do their job, and I’m gonna stay out of this. I have no intention of borrowing any more trouble.” He laughed, it was bitter and

humourless. “Can’t change that, I guess.” He looked into the house and saw me. “Look, I gotta go, just pass the messages along, I’ll deal with the rest when I return,” he said. “No, well, okay, fine. Go to Nubinero and sort things out, then… I can’t, I’m busy… No, my health is fine… I’ll explain later.” He put the phone back in his pocket and got back in.

I kept eating the pomegranate.

He entered the kitchen and went straight for the fridge where he dug out a beer.

He took a long pull, then rubbed at the back of his head.

“Is there something wrong with your health?” I’m not sure what led to that train of thought, but I believed I had to ask.

Kaden looked at me and there was something in his face that was strange. Was it suspicion?

“Brandon,” he said loudly.

“Yes Alpha,” answered Brandon from the dining room.

“Find yourself something to do elsewhere,” said Kaden.

Brandon did look a little strangely at us but he scrambled to get his things and left in a hurry.

I looked back at Kaden. It was hard for me to look him in the eyes as there was such a sharp discrepancy in our heights.

He went to the small living room, and sat down. He gestured at me to do the same and so I did.

He was sitting in a big winged chair, and I on the love seat, my pomegranate still in my hands.

He put his beer on the coffee table and ran his fingers through his hair, his elbows on his knees. I waited and ate a few more seeds.

He looked back up at me.

“Have you hurt me?” he asked me.

I froze with bits of fruits in my hand, halfway to my mouth. “Why would I do that?”

He shrugged.

I concentrated on him. Why would he ask me that? Unless someone hurt him. I looked a little deeper and put the fruit on the coffee table. I opened my senses.

At first, I got hit by two things. His significant aura, and the pull of our bond. I tried to shove both of these things in the back of my mind and focused a little deeper.

His posture had changed, he was looking strangely at me. I got closer and extended instinctively my left hand over his aura. I moved it in slow circles and rested a few inches away and right above his heart. There was something there. Something abnormal. Something deep. I closed

my eyes and tilted my head softly. Listening to a melody beyond sound. It was soft and beautiful, and damaged.

I looked at him again.

He was guarded, he didn't stop me, but he was unsure, uncomfortable maybe even.

I dropped my hand back to my lap.

"You're hurt," I said.

"Possibly," he answered.

I shook my head. "Very," I looked into his eyes. "Deeply."

He said nothing.

"It goes all the way to your soul," I said.

That got a reaction out of him. His eyebrows raised high. "How do you know?"

"I…" I began, but I hesitated, and bit my lip. I crunched my brows. "Why do you…? You're looking for the person who did this? Where you attacked?" I asked.

He lay back in his chair, put his hands on the armrest, and just looked at me.

I believe it was to me to answer this, and so did he.

I closed my eyes again and tilted my head in no specific direction.

I took a deep breath.

I let my instincts take over.

"The wounds are deep. They need time to heal," I said, my voice a little deeper. "It will take time, if you don't give it, they may devour you."

"What would devour me?" he interrupted me. His voice was very even, artificially controlled.

I looked back at him. "The wounds."

"And how would that happen?" he asked in the same monotone.

I let my eyes go out of focus. "Your life will fall apart. Your soul is too brittle."

It was some of the most horrifying wounds I've ever seen. I had to shut down my sense or the pain threatened to shatter my resolve to do so and I could barely hold back tears.

"Who did this to you?" I asked in a whisper.

"I thought maybe you did."

I looked up sharply. “How?” I asked confused. “How can something like this be done? Why would I do…” I choked on the words ‘*that* to *you*’.

I didn’t know this man, but I knew it would be one of the most difficult things in the world to simply wish him harm.

He tilted his head at me. “You really don’t know?”

“Know what?”

“How is your health?” he asked me.

“My health is fine,” I said. “Why? Shouldn’t it be?”

“I don’t know,” he said in an exhale. “I began feeling your presence as a teen. But I could never find you. It grew more intense with years. It became painful. With the years, my health started to go down.”

I just stood there in utter shock.

“My healing abilities compensated for some of this, but I was not getting better, not by a long shot.”

“How?” I whispered.

He shrugged. “I considered that you had died and was haunting me, or you had cursed me, or a bunch of even more far-fetched ideas.”

“It comes from me?” I can’t have done something this horrifying to someone.

“I think so,” he said.

I couldn’t stop my tears this time. The echoes of what I’d perceived just assailed my mind repeatedly and the only thing I manage to do was to put my hand on my mouth and mumble, “I’m sorry,” in between tears.

My vision became blurry. “I never… I’m sorry,” I repeated.

I felt the sofa dip as he sat beside me and took me in his arms.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t want to make you cry. I just needed to know if you did this.”

I put my left hand pressed against his chest, knowing exactly what to look for this time.

And I could feel it, I could feel the contact between us affect the wounds, softening the edges. I could affect it, which meant I really did this.

I wiped at my tears. I don’t remember falling apart like this since I’ve been a child. I’ve opened up too much. I’ve dug too deep, and it was hurting me back. I was letting his wounds, wound me and I had to build up my defenses to protect myself. It took me maybe a minute or two. I

was breathing deeply, he was saying nothing, and was waiting patiently for me to return inside my own mind.

“I’m sorry,” I said, my voice more solid this time. “I went too deep. I can control myself.”

“How?” he asked.

I bit my bottom lip, my eyes still closed.

“Trust goes both ways,” he said.

He was right, but the price of trust is not the same for either of us.

“Insight,” I conceded.

— Chapter Eleven —

SOME WOULD CALL ME A BIT OF A TROUBLEMAKER

— Kaden —

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I… My instincts are sharper than most. If I open my senses, I can get more. I don't always control what I get or how much, but I can aim it a little," Elaeya explained.

"Is that how you saw my injuries?"

"I didn't *see* them, at least not with my eyes."

"What else did you see?"

"I see…" She tilted her head slightly, her eyes getting out of focus again, her hand resting on my chest again. "I see that contact between us helps heal you faster."

"Does it?" I supposed it wasn't a far-fetched idea if it was the distance that had caused it. "Does this help?" I pressed my lips on hers.

Frankly, I could stop all life plans and just kiss her for the rest of my life. That sounded like an excellent retirement plan. I don't remember being this obsessed with physical contact with a woman since puberty.

She nodded, but didn't break the kiss, so I slid my hands on either side of her hips and pulled her astride me. This was much better.

The fact that half her back was exposed didn't go unnoticed for long and I reveled in the skin contact. I mean, it's for health, you know.

I don't know how much healing our make-out session gave me, but I felt wonderful.

"What are you?" I asked her.

Her eyes shifted away from me. She was clearly uncomfortable.

"I know you're a hybrid," I told her. "You don't have to tell me now if you don't want to, but sooner or later I'm gonna have to know."

She nodded, her eyes still away from mine.

"I don't care," I said.

"About what?"

"About what you are."

"You might not say that later."

"Why?"

She shrugged. "I could bring you trouble."

"I'll definitely bring you trouble," I told her.

She looked back into my eyes. Whenever she did that, it was like I was being pulled inside, as if every second made the world around me fade a little bit more.

"How?" she asked me.

"Some would call me a bit of a troublemaker," I said, still not breaking away from her gaze.

She broke it first, her eyes going to my jawline, her index finger tracing ever so lightly a scar I had there. Then she traced with her other index a faint mark near my hairline on the opposite side of my head. She looked at the scars as if she was reading their story in a book.

"Trouble," she whispered, her attention still on my skin, the touch so delicate, it made me shudder in pleasure. A little smile graced the corner of her lips at this, but she kept her eyes on my skin, finding other scars. There was a long one above my collarbone and going further under my shirt. Her finger slowed as it was halted by my clothes.

I had half a mind to take my shirt off so she could keep this up, when my bloody phone rang.

It was not a number that I had in my contacts.

Elaeya looked behind her through the window at the sunset. "I think this call is for me," she said looking back at me.

Right, her parents.

She took the phone and looked at the screen, nodded as she recognized the number, and answered.

She didn't leave my laps, which I appreciated, so I just put my hand on her thighs and enjoyed the view. And I don't just mean the sunset.

"Hello," she answered.

"Ela," her father said, or so I assumed it was him. His voice had a different quality to it. Far more human this time. I doubted he was shifted. "How are you?"

"I am fine."

"How do they treat you?"

"Respectfully," she said.

"Where are you?"

“An allied pack named Monaweard.”

“You are far,” he noted.

“I doubt there are many packs closer to camp.”

He sighed. “Probably not.”

“How is Mother?”

“Not happy.”

“Is she around?”

“No. I’m pretty sure a part of her made sure she had something to do elsewhere not to have to face you right now.”

“Is it this bad?”

“It’s…” He sighed. “It’s hard on her. I’m sure she will talk to you tomorrow. She is afraid. It brings back rough memories.”

“I understand.”

“No, you don’t. But you understand enough, child. This decision has to be your own.”

“Mmh,” she replied.

“Just tell me you’re okay.”

“I am.”

“Good, I will talk to you in the morning. Maybe if we are lucky your mother will be there too.”

I saw a faint reflective glint in Elaeya’s eyes as they went out of focus for an instant.

“She will be,” she said firmly.

“Take care,” he told her.

“Take care,” she replied. “Both.” She hung up and gave me back my phone.

“Does insight also gives you knowledge of the future?” I asked her.

“Sometimes,” she replied, hesitant.

“That’s convenient,” I said.

She shrugged.

“Can I ask what is wrong with your mother?” I asked her.

“My situation … this…” she gestured vaguely at us. “It scares her.”

"Why?" I asked.

"She … the past has not been kind to her. It hasn't been so for either of my parents. They worry about me."

"What happened?"

She laid her head on my shoulder for a minute before she started to talk.

"My maternal grandfather was at the head of his tribe. He was also in an open relationship with his wife. My mother was the fruit of such a relationship. Her mother, got into a difficult situation when my mother was very young and she sent her to live with her father. He, and his wife raised her like their own. Making no distinction between their daughter and my mother, but it was not common knowledge that she was illegitimate. As the tribe was strongly against hybrids, they also kept that information under lock and key.

My grandfather's second was only a few years younger than him. He had married young, the girl had died along with their child in childbirth. So when he discovered that my mother was his mate he was more than thrilled, and they forgot the age gap very rapidly. When my mother got pregnant with a boy, I believe he saw suddenly the possibilities open to him, as my grandfather had no sons. He was the second in command and his son-in-law after all. One evening after drinking a little too much, and bragging a little too much, someone who knew, informed him that he was married to the illegitimate one.

He came home that night, drunk and furious. He would berate my mother, and be harsh on her. Then once again he would be the sweetest to her, to switch back to anger and animosity. Like a pendulum, day after day.

But after my mother gave birth, he overheard her talk to her step-mother about how her son could be affected by being a hybrid.

Not all hybrids are easily detected. And my mother had a necklace given to her by her mother which helped her camouflage, and she wanted to find one for her son.

But her husband found out, and when the three of them returned home, he flew into a rage like he had never done before. His anger became physical and he beat on my mother to an inch of her life. He was himself quite strong, to begin with, his weakened wife had no chance. Then he dragged her by the hair to their child's bedroom, took a knife to the crib, and hacked at the newborn while she watched helplessly. Then he threw her in the basement and told her that he would inform the tribe that the filthy hybrid killed their infant son, and that if anyone ever saw her again, they'd killed her for it. No one would believe a hybrid over the Second. Then he threw the corpse of their child in there with her, in case she would get 'hungry'. And he locked her up.

It took her days, and she survived only because she managed to damage a water pipe so she could drink a little water. But she eventually dug her way out of there. She wrapped the child in what little clothes she could.

She buried him in the wood, in an unmarked grave, and left her tribe, never to return."

There were a few seconds of silence.

I slid my fingers instinctively through her hair.

"So now she's afraid her daughter might get a mate?"

"Yes, and she is particularly untrusting towards anyone powerful, in a position of power, or who has ambitions."

"I see," I said absentmindedly. I heard of men having issues with their mothers-in-law, but there was a level of trauma here, I didn't know if I could ever overcome.

"My father came from a normal family," she said. "He was not born with rank. His pack was isolationist and highly traditionalists. So when my father began showing signs of being more capable than what his position warranted, it made some people uncomfortable. But a few saw potential in him, and before his teenage years he was already training with warriors. As he grew into a young man, some began to realize he had the potential of an Alpha. Made-Alphas are rare, and traditionalist pack gave power only to Blood-Alphas. And then he found his mate in the daughter of the Alpha. It created even more of a stir. The son of the Alpha in particular, reacted very negatively, and ultimately, she was convinced to reject her mate to marry the Alpha of another pack. And within a week of this, she was gone.

My father was not very happy about this, but he also understood that his situation was becoming precarious. Meanwhile, the Alpha died, and his son saw more and more comparisons between the two of them, and began spiraling down. Which only fueled a faction within the pack to believe he might not be suited for leadership, and my father had the right strength to challenge him. And the more this happened, the more the Alpha became paranoid and unstable, and the more it fueled resistance. By this point, there were some considering fractionating the pack into two, and departing with my father at their head.

In the middle of all this, my father said nothing. He did not encourage it—knowing how risky this was—but his anger got the best of him and he nonetheless enjoyed watching the Alpha fall apart.

One evening, the Alpha berated him in front of the whole pack, and my father stayed stoic, which only enraged the Alpha further, and in a moment of impulse, asked my father for a challenge.

Refusing was not really an option. My father, at first, thought of ending it in a draw if possible. But things escalated. They were both young and their emotions got the best of them. In the end,

my father won, and in a fit of despair, the Alpha declared it was too late to transfer power that night, and it would be done in the morning.

In the middle of the night, the Alpha sneaked into my father's room with around twenty of his most faithful, and before my father woke, they attacked him. They beat and clawed at him until there was nothing left but a mangled corpse, that they loaded in a truck, and went to dump off a cliff deep in the woods.

My father's heartbeats were so faint then that they didn't hear them. Luckily he was dropped at arm's length of a stream. It took him a week of drinking from the stream until he could catch and eat a frog. In a few more weeks he was strong enough to crawl. He did so until he reached a harbor, sneaked into the cargo, and left the island to never return.

When he met my mother, she accidentally stumbled upon him. He had severe infections from his wounds and could not move most of his body, but when she was chased, he shot the attacker with a stolen gun. In exchange, she treated his wounds. He realized early on that she was a hybrid, but he never made anything of it. And soon they fell into a rhythm of helping one another, caring for one another. I am not even sure if they even spoke until I was born.

They never were in love, but they have respect and care for one another. They both have suffered great wounds and found comfort in the safety of each other. That's why I was never part of any pack. Because packs have betrayed them, hurt them, and the people in power abused them, their mates broke faith with them."

"And now they think it will happen to you?"

"I am sure the idea crossed their mind."

"I don't intend to hurt you," I said.

"Maybe," she said.

"Is that what your insight is saying?"

She raised her head from my shoulder and looked in my eyes.

Her eyes changed. All werewolves have eyes that change colour when our wolf is close to the surface, but I don't know if it's her wolf that got close to the surface when she looked. But those were no werewolf eyes I'd ever seen. They became opalescent. It was like looking at moonstones, with their lustre that reflects light. She put her hands on me, and closed her eyes. When she opened them again, they were back to their usual pink. She shook her head.

"You won't hurt me," she said. "But that doesn't mean I won't be hurt."

"Will you?" I asked.

"I don't know," she said honestly.

— Chapter Twelve —

TAKING THINGS THE WRONG WAY

— Elaeya —

His phone rang again.

He sighed as he looked at his screen.

“Yeah,” he answered.

‘*You want me to leave?*’ I mouthed silently at him, pointing at myself then the door.

He shook his head, at the same time I heard an angry woman’s voice on the phone.

“You had to fucking stay, and send me off,” she screamed.

“Ylva,” he interjected.

“I’m not some stupid rookie…” she continued.

“Ylva,” he interjected again, a little louder this time.

“You condescending, misogynistic, bastard.”

“YLVA.” She stopped talking this time. “You’re hurt, you needed medical attention.”

“I’m not that hurt.”

“And what I’m doing doesn’t require me to risk you.”

“That’s some male bullsh—.” He didn’t let her finish that thought.

“I would have done the exact same thing if you’d been a man. Stop seeing attacks everywhere. I’ve never stopped you from doing what you wanted because of gender. You need to heal. I want you in top shape as soon as possible.”

“Is that because we sleep together?” she asked a little less aggressive, uncertain maybe even.

Kaden gave me a worried look.

“It has nothing to do with that,” he said.

“Really?” she began.

“I’m not your mate Ylva. He’s the one who wanted you to retire from fighting to be a stay-at-home mom. I never cared. It was never about that to begin with. You’ve not been sent back home because I’m patronizing you, but because I want you to be able to keep doing your job.”

She was silent for a few seconds. Kaden gave me another side glance.

“And talking about us, I think it has come to an end,” he said.

“Because I stand up to you?” she sneered.

“Because I found my mate.”

The silence rang on the line for a little while.

“Is this why you send me back? Not to be in your way?” she asked.

“You got to see a fucking therapist. Why do you keep taking things the wrong way? Were you expecting us to get serious?”

“No, no, I’m not. It’s not… How is she?” she obviously changed the subject, her tone softer, gentler.

“I don’t think she trusts me yet,” he said looking at me. “But I’m working on it.”

“When will you bring her back?”

“I don’t know if I will,” he said frankly. “We’ll see. Just don’t start rumours now.”

“Sure,” she said.

“You okay?”

“No, I’m fucking pissed.”

“If it’s about me…”

“It’s not,” she conceded. “It’s… Later.” She hung up.

He put the phone back in his pocket. I guess it’s common for them to end calls this roughly.

Kaden looked at me. By sitting on his lap we were more or less at eye level.

“Does it bother you?” he asked me.

“What?” I tilted my head sideways.

“My relationship with Ylva,” he answered.

“Do you love her?”

“No. Well, yes. I care about her. She’s a friend. But I have no romantic love for her. What happened between us had nothing to do with love.”

“Does she think the same?” I asked.

“Yes. We kept this clear from the get-go.”

“It doesn’t mean it couldn’t evolve.”

“But it didn’t. Ylva is not the type for that. We’re not really compatible with those types of relationships, to begin with.”

I nodded.

“So?” he asked. “Does it bother you?”

“Should it?” I asked genuinely curious.

He shrugged.

I shrugged.

I yawned uncontrollably. He looked at his watch.

“You barely had any sleep this morning. You should go to bed,” he told me.

I nodded and got up. We walked towards the staircase, until the silence was broken by his ringtone again.

“I swear today is not ending soon enough,” he grumbled angrily as he picked the phone up. “What?” he answered irritated, and gestured at me to go ahead.

I did.

— Kaden —

My father called again.

I sat on a stool by the kitchen island.

“What is it this time?”

“Hey, there tiger. Ease off the angst. I’m going to do work you should be doing, so be a little decent about it.”

I sighed. “It’s been a long day. I haven’t much slept, I think I need a vacation,” I said dismissively.

“What’s going on?” my father’s voice did a one-eighty and went from seriously annoyed with me, to worried. I guess I haven’t asked for a holiday since … well since my high school graduation I guess. I suppose that could feel off to anyone who knew me.

“It’s not like that,” I said. “It’s just that today could have been a little smoother. What is it about?” I got his attention back to the matters at hand.

“Well, I talked to the Brotherhood, and I’m accompanying a Brother with a few warriors to Nubinero, so that we can deal with this and close this matter once and for all.”

“Good,” I said.

Elaeya walked down from the stairs in what looked like a negligee mostly covered by a silk kimono.

I tried not to let my jaw hit the floor and my eyes bulge out like a freaking cartoon. Still, I could appreciate the effort Mariqueen put into getting her clothes, she looked incredible. It took me a few seconds to realize her eyes had changed colour again. They were their moonstone self, or maybe white opals. I'm not an expert in gemstones. She walked to me, picked a couple of files Brandon must have left on the counter, and started flipping through without looking at the pages.

"Son? Kaden?" my father asked. I have the feeling he asked a few more times before that, I just didn't notice.

"Mmh," I said distracted.

Elaeya landed her finger on one word on one page and showed it to me.

Not

"I might be gone for just a few hours tomorrow, but with the Brotherhood I can never be sure," my father told me.

Meanwhile, Elaeya flipped through seemingly random pages and random places, showing me three more words.

What - It - Seems

Wait! She was telling me something.

"Hold on," I told my father.

She flipped again, faster this time.

Assailants - Are - Victims - Don't - Attack - Careful - Father

Her eyes blinked a few times rapidly, and they returned to their natural pink.

"Okay," I told my father. "I'm not sure of this information," I said looking at Elaeya. She didn't interrupt me or tried to convince me further. She went to the cabinet, found glasses on the first try, and pour herself a glass of water that she drank. "I think something might appear as not what it is. That there might be some sort of attack where the apparent assailants are actual victims. You should not attack but be careful."

"Where is this coming from?" he asked me.

"A very vague source. I don't know how legitimate it is, but just be vigilant and keep an eye out for any weirdness," I told him.

"Sure," he said. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine. I just need some rest."

"You sound like you need more than rest."

"I need time," I admitted.

"For what?"

"I found my mate," I told him. "Her father gave me three days starting early this morning, or late last night, depending on your perspective, to convince her to come with me."

Silence. I checked to be sure the line wasn't dead. It wasn't.

"It's just a bit hard to do when my phone keeps ringing every fifteen minutes," I admitted.

"It won't," my father said. "I'm calling Brandon to reroute all your calls. I'll deal with Nubinero, and the Brotherhood, and the artifacts, and I'll take charge of the pack while you're away. Take all the time you need."

"Thanks. Can you please not tell mom and the girls? I don't know if it'll work out yet. I don't…"

"… Want a welcoming party for two thousand people planned out?" he finished my thoughts.

"Something like that," I admitted.

"Don't worry. It can wait until we know for sure."

"Thanks."

"Rest, do what you need to, we can talk in three days, or whenever you're ready."

"Right, 'night."

"'Night son."

I put my phone back in my pocket. Elaeya came to me with a glass of water. I was parched actually, and I swallowed the whole thing in one go.

Her eyes went down to my left leg. It was shaking fast, and from the tension in my muscles, probably had been since I sat down.

"I'm restless," I explained. "I don't sleep well as of late. It gets worse when I'm about to go to bed."

She simply extended her hand to me in response. I instinctively took it. She guided me up the stair, closing the lights on the way. On the upper floor, she guided me through the open door of her bedroom, and inside her room.

— Chapter Thirteen —

NOT WHAT I INTENDED

— Elaeya —

When I turned around and looked at him, his eyes looked dark, his posture had changed, and I realized what this looked like. This is not what I intended. What did I intend?

I didn't think. I went on instincts. But why? There had to be a reason. In looking for that reason in my head, I got closer to him. It had to do with his situation. He needed to heal, and I suddenly knew that I both helped him and made it worse. I'm not sure how. But I knew he needed my help.

He was slowly getting closer to me, bending his head closer to mine. I could feel the pressure of his sheer presence against my skin. The inexorability of this attraction, that was far beyond reason or will. I got my head up to better see him. The light in the bedroom was off, but the curtains were not closed. The moonlight was faint, but I could see him. His lips were now brushing mines.

"This is not what I meant," I said.

He stopped, pulled his head back ever so slightly. "What?" he asked confused.

"Mmmh… I…" I closed my eyes and focused my mind. "You shouldn't sleep alone." I looked back at him. He looked torn between different thoughts, but not the right thoughts. "I do not mean intimacy," I rushed out the clarification. "It is just…" this was not going the way that I intended. I didn't even intend any of this. It just happened, and now I was confusing both of us. I found no issue out of this awkward situation.

I opened my mouth to try and explain myself further, but he talked first.

"It's okay," he told me.

Was it though?

I was hesitant, but he guided me to my bed. For an instant, my heartbeat accelerated and my feet faltered, but I didn't feel the strength in me to stop him. He got me under the covers, and laid them smoothly on top of me, without getting into bed with me.

I don't think he understood what I tried to say.

He sat on the bed next to me.

"I…" I began. "I think I confused the both of us. I'm sorry."

"It's that insight thing?" he asked me.

“Yes,” I answered calmer this time.

“It told you something about me?”

I nodded. “I do not know details. I usually don’t. It is not always knowledge, just instinctual movements, reactions. I act, and often time only while I’m doing things I realize it had to be done.”

“What did you get about me?” he asked me, his shadow huge in the darkness.

“I am not sure. I think I both help you and make it worse. I do not know how. I know you are better when I’m close. Sleep is a time when everyone is more vulnerable, but also when we restore ourselves the most. I think my presence might disrupt your sleep.”

“But not if I sleep here?” he asked.

“I do not know the answers to your questions, I just know how to move, not why.”

“What does this mean?”

I did not know either, but I scooted over a little.

He turned around, I think he took his socks out. He took what he had in his pocket out and put it on the nightstand, and laid beside me on top of the covers.

“Won’t you be cold?” I asked him.

“I’m fine.”

“It is unnecessary.” It is not like there weren’t enough blankets.

“It is,” he said. It took me a few seconds to realize what he meant.

“Oh,” was all I managed to say.

I felt his breathing slowed, and he was asleep.

Every normal instinct a person has told me this was like taking a nap next to a dragon. It was not a recommended course of action. He was strong, dangerous. When I met him, he smelt of blood and death, and there is still some darkness in his aura that should scare me. But it did not. Has he slept next to me, all that my instincts told me, was that this his where I should be, and where he should too.

I laid my finger on his jawline, scratching them on the stubble. I should not do this, I could wake him up, but I just continued to move my fingers to his neck and collarbone. He moved a shade. For a moment, my mind thought that I was waking him up, but beyond my mind, there was something that told me not to stop. He leaned a little against my touch, clearly not waking, but enjoying the motion nonetheless.

So I did not stop.

— Kaden —

There were a million things that got through my mind, but at this moment, none of them included sleeping.

It was clear she was uncomfortable. Things were going so fast between us, probably faster than she was ready to deal with.

When I finally put my head on that pillow, I thought that there was no way in hell I'm going to be able to sleep, but apparently, I was wrong.

When I woke up, it felt like I'd slept for half a geological epoch. I don't remember feeling this well-rested in a very long time. The light was diffused through veil-like curtains, but there was enough of it going through to tell me that the day was clearly underway. I was not as groggy as I should have been.

There was a small blanket that had been tossed over me. I was on my back, still wearing yesterday's clothes, and on top of my right arm was a very pleasant weight.

I mean, my arm was totally numb, but I somehow enjoyed the pressure. Especially as it pressed a soft figure against my side.

I turned to take a peek.

Elaeya was awake, her eyes on me.

"Hi," I told her.

"Good afternoon," she replied.

That took a few seconds to process. "Afternoon?" I looked up and outside, then I tried to dig for my stuff somewhere on the nightstand without disrupting her.

"It is," she told me.

"I can't have slept this much," I said confused. My phone displayed two thirty-five. I blinked a few times still dumbfounded.

"You did. Very deeply."

"You didn't sleep all this time, did you?"

"I woke up early."

"Eum. Then why did you stay in bed?"

I got up briefly, but it seemed to disrupt your sleep, so I got back in bed.

"Oh. Sorry," I said sheepishly.

She shook her head. "It's not like I was very busy."

I licked my lips nervously. “Right.”

Then another part of my brain uncongealed.

“The call. At dawn. I mean your parent.” I blurted half-coherently.

“They called. We talked. You slept through it.”

“Oh,” I let my head fall back on the pillow, deflated.

“You needed this,” she told me.

“Maybe,” I said.

I’m not sure sleeping that much is going to motivate her in coming back home with me. I’m going to have to step up my game.

— Elaeya —

The day was well underway.

We both got into a shower—him in his bathroom and me in mine—and dressed up for the rest of the day.

I don’t remember spending so much time in bed unless I had been sick. The mattress was comfortable, the shower divine, the clothes agreeable and well-fitted, and I don’t remember being this relaxed. I was used to difficult scheduling, demanding tasks, and labour-intensive days. But today, there was no training, no hunting, no moving, nothing.

I was terribly hungry though, so I was glad to find prepared food in the refrigerator ready to warm up and eat. I did not even have to cook.

When I got down, Kaden was already there, eating some beef stew with bread, so I took heated left-overs and sat next to him.

We both ate in silence.

I am not used to small talks, and from the looks of it, neither was he. But this will have to change. It is impossible to learn about one another without a conversation first.

I opened my mouth to say something, when one of the men got into the house, he was soon followed by Brandon.

Kaden growled. It was low, nearly subsonic, but everything on the table shook and clanked in response.

Before Brandon had time to step through the doorway, the other one dragged him back and closed the door behind them, leaving us alone again.

I looked at Kaden askance.

He blinked at me as if no one ever did this.

“That was not very polite,” I said.

“Neither were they,” was his answer.

“How so? Were they told not to come inside the house?”

“They know it’s not the best of times for this.”

“Really?” I asked suspiciously.

His face turned a little sheepish.

“If the orders are not clear, it is the fault of the general that they are not properly followed,” I told him.

“The Art of War?” He raised an eyebrow at me.

“I read,” I told him, then took another bite.

He smiled some and ate some more.

The stew was delicious.

“What else do you read?” he asked a few minutes later.

“Mostly what I can get my hands on. The choices are not always varied, but I like history and science. What do you read?”

“Mostly reports and contracts, but I try to get myself a book once in a while,” he paused, looking pensive. “But I don’t think I’ve read for fun in the last … five … eight years.”

“What do you do for fun then?”

He thought about it some more. “I mostly train or get info I need, I don’t really do stuff for fun anymore,” he admitted.

“That is not the healthiest of habit,” I noted.

“Probably not,” he admitted. “What do you do for fun?”

“I … do not do many things for fun either,” I conceded.

“I guess we’re not the best at having healthy hobbies.”

“I guess not.” I took my last bite then leaned back. “My parents and I spend most of our lives moving from place to place. We never stayed anywhere for long. Sometimes we would get a house, or an apartment, but often time we stuck to the woods. Everything is a little harder without the convenience of a roof, bathtub, microwave, plumbing. It is not really hard to get your day filled up quickly. When there is no grocery store around, acquiring food is far more complex too,” I told him. He had finished his plate too and was leaning back, listening. “It is not

that I am complaining. I never lacked the essentials. But things like theaters, and restaurants, and bars, and tabletop games, those are really foreign to me. I am not uncultured, it is simply that I have not been exposed to much of it. I know how to use the internet, but I have never been on social media, I never watched Netflix, I know what Amazon is, but it is nothing I have used. I am aware that when it comes to society, I am highly deficient. If I even attempt to move to a pack, the dichotomy could be brutal at best, and an exercise in unrestrained masochism at worse."

He was looking at me, his expression unreadable.

"You would not be left on your own," he told me.

"Maybe," I admitted. "But I do not have money, or a working social security number. I do not have a passport, I do not own much of anything, I do not have a college degree, a job, or a career."

"You could still be fine," he said.

"Could I?" I asked. "What can I do in a pack, or in any society, for that matter?"

"There are plenty of things you can do. You can get a college degree if you want one, or a career, anything you like."

"It is not that simple. Everything has a cost." I got up, picked our plates, and put them on the counter next to the sink.

"Everyone in my pack as free education. Jobs are given to those that haven't found any. There is social security for those who can't work anymore. No one is left without a roof over their head."

"Is that so?" I asked while I poured water in the sink to clean up.

"You don't need to do that. Someone will take care of this," he told me.

I turned around and gave him a reproving look.

"I am not so incapable that I need to be cared for like a child," I told him.

"That's not what I meant," he back-pedaled. "Just that there are people for this."

"And when was the last time you cleaned after yourself?" I asked genuinely curious.

He said nothing.

I turned around again. He suddenly looked like a man-child to me.

"Here," I said. "You are cleaning up after yourself."

"Euh, and why exactly?"

"If you never had to clean up after yourself, does it mean that when something will happen and there is not domestic or docile pack members to do it that this would become my task? Do you expect me to become your mother?"

"What? No, no, no, no." He realized the accusation in my tone and backtracked quickly. "Don't worry. There are enough people to do those things in my pack."

"I do not believe you understand what I meant," I said calmly, putting soap in the sink. "Life is not only made of manual labour. Work is part of everything, including relationships. If something as benign as washing a pair of plates is too much for you, then something as complex as partnership might be beyond us. I will not become one more domestic to order around, or—." He got up and walked next to me to help out, cutting me off.

I didn't say anything further. He said nothing either.

He didn't look angry, or troubled, or anything really.

It was hard for me to know what he was thinking. At least without opening my senses. I knew he was generally quite sincere, but that was mostly it.

I did not want to nag at him, but I did not want to set things in motion the wrong way either.

When we were done, he leaned against the counter.

"I don't want to put you in a box you don't want to be into," he told me. "I know there will be a lot to adjust. I'm just not sure how to go at it."

"I am not either," I admitted. "And I am probably not the best to ask. I am sorry about earlier, I did not want to hound you like that. It was not what I meant."

He nodded. "Good."

"I am not good with the whole matter of domestics either. I have always taken care of myself. I never had any spare finances for, well, mostly anything."

"Well, if that is an issue, if we get together it wouldn't be the case anymore. I'm loaded."

My gaze hardened.

"Is that what they called a sugar daddy? Or is the proper parlance a gold digger? That is not what I want for myself," I said sternly.

He, on the other hand, looked like he was about to start laughing. "Good to know," he said.

My mind whirled and my thoughts realigned at his reaction. "Were you testing me?"

"Not exactly," he said, then tilted his head slightly. "Maybe a little. It's something I needed to know."

I pursed my lips. I did not like it, but I could not argue with sound arguments. If he was of means, then he might have had to weed out people ready to use him before.

I supposed that by his reaction, I did not seem like a threat.

I am not sure what it meant about us, that we used tactics to find the truth about the other. Even more so that to begin with, I was hiding so much more from him.

— Chapter Fourteen —

I COULD BE A FREAKING DETECTIVE

— Mishka —

I was sitting on a bench in a plane with a small battalion getting ready for battle. Alpha Devon—the other Alpha Devon—was in the office with the captains preparing for the take-over and occupation of Nubinero.

I had my head against the wall of the cabin, with my eyes closed. It would be nice if I could get a nap, but we were so cramped up together that it would take a small miracle for me to fall asleep.

Someone shook me awake.

“Man, could you droll on someone else’s shoulder,” whined a guy named Dodson next to me.

I wiped at my mouth with the back of my hand and got my head up, blinking a few times.

A couple of guys sneered in my direction. I wiped at my mouth again, then tried to take the gunk out of my eyes with my pinky finger.

The plane had initiated it’s decent now, the change in pressure discernable on my skin, the engines roaring.

“Wakey, wakey, sleeping beauty,” said a big black dude by the name of Georges. “We’re nearly there. Better get your dress on because we’re about to party.”

“Good,” I said. “I was so bored I nearly fell asleep.”

That got me a few more snickers.

Dodson wiped at his shoulder in disgust.

“You’re not nearly as cute as you think you are,” he told me.

“Oh, I’m not cute,” I said. “I’m absolutely adorable.”

More snickers.

I love an audience.

It’s like a drug.

“Isn’t Mishka a girl’s name?” asked a blond guy named Noah.

“It’s whatever you want it to be, Blondy.”

“Man, don’t you have any shame?” asked George.

“What is this thing you call *’shame*?” I said.

Noah snickered and shook his head.

“I don’t know from what rabbit hole you popped out of, but you’re one strange rabbit,” said Dodson.

“Aaaaah,” I said to him in a mock girly voice as the plane hit the tarmac. “That’s so sweet of you darling, but I’m not that kind of rabbit. You’re gonna have to work harder for me.”

That got me more jeering.

Dodson looked at me as if I was a moron. Because I’m not, obviously.

“You do know I’m married, right?”

I put my hand against my heart and mocked shock. “You mislead me, you scarlet fiend.”

“Okay ladies,” said one of the captains coming into our cabin, holding himself on the handles on the ceiling, as the plane wasn’t stationary yet. “That’s enough, for now, let’s get ready, there’s gonna be a few Brotherhood envoys and their team waiting for us.”

“But Daddy,” I whined in a child’s voice. “Dodson keeps being a tease.”

I heard a few more snorts. George threw something in my face which turned out to be a dirty towel.

I took it off pinched between my thumb and forefinger and held it at arm’s length. “Beeeeeeurrk.”

The Captain gave me a pointed look. “Now if the kids can behave, I’m gonna give you the run down.”

And he did.

It was fairly simple really. Mostly we had to cover the brotherhood boys’ ass, secure the location, comb through everything to make sure they didn’t have bad surprises hidden somewhere for us, no stolen artifacts either, or Machiavellian plans pinned on a murder wall with a bunch of red yarn linking it all up, or any other shenanigans. Also, there have been reports that some people might appear as dangerous but turn out to be victims, so we had to be on the lookout for it, and some possible kind of sucker punch. Secure the place, and civilians, and let the Brotherhood go through everything safely and make their decisions, and support them all the way.

Again, fairly simple.

Simple doesn’t necessarily means easy, but I least you don’t risk too much to trip on the specifics of the job.

We got out of the plane in disciplined order.

I've been training with these guys for nearly two months now, and though I'm the new guy, my past experience has allowed me to keep up with them pretty well. I knew the codes now, the formations, and everything. I've been working particularly hard on the teamwork. That as always been my greatest weakness.

But hey, look at me, I'm a team player now. Who would have thought?

"Now, Alpha Devon," said a Brother to the Alpha. "If there are any more artifacts, they are going under the aegis of the Brotherhood, understood?" Alpha Devon raised his eyebrow at him, and looked like someone had shoved a lemon on his gums. He also turned back to look ahead and didn't answer the guy.

We were walking in formations towards the vehicles that would take us the rest of the way to Nubinero.

Sebastian Devon was nearly sixty, I haven't seen that many Alphas at this age look this fit. And from what I've seen too, pretty sharp. He was also, not taking much shit from the Brotherhood. Good for him.

I could see some resemblance with his son. He was nearly as tall, broad shoulders, had obviously quite a collection of scars himself, and the little grey that he had in his hair gave him more of a wise look, than incapable withering one.

Quite frankly, if I could look this good at that age, that would be impressive.

Nothing in his demeanor made us feel like his was weakening with age. I haven't seen him in the past, but I don't have the feeling he's out of his prime yet.

Most Alphas in that shape would not consider giving power away to their heir, but then again, if your son is the Hellhound, then I guess it's an idea that can gain traction. Besides, he gave away power, to be instead given another pack to rule, so, I guess, win-win.

I also noticed, as I got into my own designated humvee, that the Alpha didn't much enjoy the idea of giving anything to the Brotherhood. It's probably my astute sleuthing skills talking, and the fact that whenever he looked at the guy he made a face like he just puked a little in his mouth. That or the fact that I heard him mutter to one of his Captains as he went around his humvee—the brother inside the vehicle with the doors closed.

"Keep everything you can away from the Brotherhood. I don't trust them. He wants something, I don't know what, but he's not gonna get it."

I know, I know. With skills this evolved, I could be a freaking detective.

Besides, I've never really trusted the Brotherhood myself. They're too engulfed in politics for my own liking.

Politicians are all about the popular vote, or middle grounds, or economic downturns, or whatever. They were technically created to care for their people, but they lost that purpose a long time ago. The people are just one more pawns on the chessboard now, one more tool on their tool belt.

Them and Batman.

It's not that this really bothers me, it's that they pretend to still be all about the people that annoys the hell outta me.

I have a thing against hypocrisy.

And authority figures.

And bigots.

And clowns… God, I hate clowns.

And yeah, the irony is not lost on me.

Once we got to the peripheral of Nubinero, we moved into formations. And did our thing.

Quite frankly, it was pretty much as smooth an operation as the one we did a few months back on that island.

God, it's good to work with professionals.

We got the first signs of something being fishy halfway through.

Quite frankly, if we hadn't been warned beforehand, I might not have realized it quick enough. At least, not to spare civilians.

Actually, once we secured most of the territory and moved to the village, a lot of attack points from their resistance factions came from the houses. It rapidly looked like guerrilla warfare. As if it was the residents attacking.

But once a few houses got secured and we moved in, we found people cowered in corners, inside cabinets and closets. We also found a few men on chairs with a mask on and a gun in front of them, to realize they were tied to the chair, and gagged under the mask. They were distractions. Easy targets to focus on while other assailants got us from behind.

It's pretty cowardly if you ask me.

Sadly, a few of those worked, but most didn't, and once the word got around, we pretty much got them at their own game.

The surviving attackers were pretty much all rounded up now—at least those that survived, which at first were a few captured enemies, but later as they realized they were done for, most of the rest raised the white flag and dumped their guns on the ground.

We were inspecting houses one after the other.

As I moved to one of my designated houses to inspect, I saw some dirt tracts lead to a small woodshed in the back. Which I went to inspect.

I got my gun out, took the safety off, and pushed the door open slowly.

It was empty.

In one corner, the dirt floor had been disturbed.

I looked around, there was no one outside, so I closed the door and dig with my hands at the ground. I found a small metal box covered with maybe nine inches of dirt. I took it out.

It contained a small notebook with scribbles in there, and a cloth wrapped around a small knife.

When I touched the blade, it felt something akin to a vibration against my skin, only it was not physically vibrating, it was a feeling deeper than skin-deep.

I'm not an expert, but I've seen magical stuff a few times. Given that this weird vibrations-like pressure on my skin was strong enough for me, a non-magical geek, to feel, meant it was significant. I pocketed the notebook and knife, careful for them not to be visible.

I'm gonna have to investigate those.

I closed the metal box, put it back in its little hole, and pushed the earth back on top.

I went to the house.

On my fourth house inspection, I found a little girl, maybe two years old inside a kitchen cabinet. A few pots and pans were on the floor, so it didn't take a genius to figure something had disturbed what was inside that cabinet.

"Mama," she said as I opened the cabinet door.

"Hey there little one. Your mommy is not inside the house. How about we go find her?" I told her.

"No," she said firmly.

Sheesh, kids are so adorable.

I extended my arms to reach under hers.

"You can't stay here sweetie, mommy is looking for you all over. Let's go find her."

I really hope it was the case.

She didn't fight me and I picked her up and put her on my left hip as I moved out.

Everyone had been evacuated from the houses and I wasn't sure how long it would take for people to have access to their home again, so I wasn't sure about leaving the kid there. It could be for hours, maybe even more. So it wasn't a great idea.

I walked out on the road and went back to where civilians were being held.

I walked around for a while, unsure how to track the parents when a woman's voice rang above all the murmurs.

"Give me back my pup," she told me firmly from the middle of the room.

Everyone was strewn on the floor, sitting in disarray, but when the kid saw her mother she pointed and said, "Mama."

I moved to the middle, slowly, walking over people's legs and everything. The mother got up. She looked half-scared of me and half ready to attack.

I picked the kid under the armpits and extended my arms, so the mother could grab her.

She did so cautiously, looking at me strangely.

"Bye bye," said the little girl to me, waving her hand clumsily.

I waved back and smiled. I'm not sure my smile was very friendly-looking because a few people looked at me really weird.

I guess scars, military gears, and weapons can make any guy look intimidating. I guess the smell of blood didn't help me either.

I guess I'm not a kid person.

I would probably make a horrible babysitter.

— Chapter Fifteen —

I'M CLEARLY NOT AN EXPERT

— Kaden —

I never realized how terrible my dating game was.

What do people do? Where do they go? What do they talk about?

And she was not helping me. Not one bit. But again, she probably didn't know more than I did.

When I try to learn about people, I generally get their criminal record, sometimes a medical record, tax return, or I have a guy. I just have to tell him a name, and he gets me a detailed report. That's it.

But if she'd stayed away from society, I don't know if there would be much information for him to find. Furthermore, I'm clearly not an expert, but I have the feeling this is not considered romantic behaviours.

But I never really ask questions. What do people ask? Full name, birthdate, blood type, medical history, living relatives, job experiences, and educations? Is 'have you visited a mental institution in the last five years', a good question, or is it 'have you visited a farm in the last fourteen days'? I think the last one means something to airports, but I don't have a bloody idea what that can be. Or is it more about favorite colours, and food, and movies, and such? She did say she didn't go to the movie often so maybe not that one.

The movies. I think this is considered a date, right?

We were sitting in the living room, pretty much in silence. She looked at the few books there and picked one. I let her and looked at my phone to hide the fact that I'm socially retarded.

I checked to see if there was a movie theater nearby. The closest one was more than two hours away, and some people mentioned in the comment section that they should take it off Google suggestions because it was closed now. Well, I guess watching a movie in silence is not the best way to learn about each other and start a conversation. Talking in a movie theater is probably an excellent way to be murdered in the darkness.

I got my message app and picked Sam's contact.

What the hell do people do on dates nowadays? I wrote.

It took maybe fifteen seconds to get an answer back.

Dude, I'm gay. I'm pretty sure neither of you wants to do what I do on dates.

God, he's useless.

He's probably laughing his head off too. At least I know he's not going to blabber to anyone who wants to know about my struggle.

Man, the Alpha's personal life has always been interesting to some. I never understood the appeal of gossip columns. I found a thread in a chat room all about rumours mostly about me and my family. Some of the things I saw… That was also the day I discovered what fanfiction meant. I still have nightmares about it.

I used my last resort and googled date ideas.

Walks. Well, I guess that's not hard. But what do you do while you walk? There is no fancy park to visit around here, and if she's been living most of her life in the woods, I'm not so sure she'll find a hike surprisingly refreshing.

Restaurants. There aren't any on Monaweard packland as far as I knew, and it would be a good drive to reach the next village. If we wanted something more culinarily evolved, we might have to drive an hour or two. Still feasible though.

Visiting tourist spots. Well, I'm not sure this is the place for it. We're pretty much in the middle of nowhere.

Cooking together. Nope. No one wants to eat anything I cook. I can roast some wild game on a fire pit if there are no other options, but I think mud-pies were my last culinary attempts. Besides, I not sure this is the kind of story I want to see posted on social media. I trust my guys, but rumours have a way to be spread. It's like magic.

Picnic. I guess it could be an option if I can convince someone to prepare one. It would be so much easier back home.

Beach. There's none around here.

Board game. I don't know how those works and she mentioned not knowing either.

Casino, skiing, spa day, day trip, shopping. Those were all out of the question because of how isolated we were, and I pretty much agreed to let her stay nearby for three days before taking her elsewhere.

Taking classes, learning new skills, volunteering, visiting a zoo, aquarium, museum. Nope, nope, nope.

Most suggestions required going far, or some form of cooking, or childish games. I mean, I saw play hide-n-seek in the suggestions. Do adults even do that? Why would they do that? Is it even fun?

I looked at her sideways.

I somehow had the feeling she might not be more interested than I.

The late afternoon sun peeked through the window and painted her skin in light shades of gold. She looked comfortable with her legs up against her body and the book resting on her knees.

She stopped reading and looked up at me.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to stare,” I said.

She blinked a few times, looked at the book, then closed it and looked back at me.

“I’m sorry. I guess it is rude of me to just read in your face,” she apologized.

“Absolutely not,” I said. “You can keep reading.”

She knotted her eyebrows together. “Something is problematic.” She told me. The way she looked at me, it was not something she was experiencing, she was reading me.

I sighed. “I guess you’re someone to whom it’s hard to hide things to.”

That made her smile. “I would advise against it.”

“I’ll take note of it.” I put my phone back in my pocket and got in a more comfortable position. “I’m trying to find things to do that would make conversation easier and less awkward, something that you could enjoy. But the options around here are very limited.”

She nodded hesitantly.

Sheesh. I guess hiding stuff is really not a good call.

“And I’m probably horrible at dating. I’m not even sure if I can remember ever doing it.”

That got her smiling again.

“I’m not sure that I have more skills in that regard,” she admitted.

I nodded. I looked at my watch.

“Well, maybe we should get dinner soon, maybe take it slow tonight. Who knows, maybe I can snatch a bottle of wine from somewhere. Then maybe tomorrow we can check this together,” I suggested.

“Sure,” she said. She didn’t look sure, but she put her book on the table and got up to the kitchen.

No one had come in with food, and we were getting out of leftovers.

I texted Sam about it.

My phone rang right after.

“Yeah,” I answered.

“You scared Stellan off, so everyone got informed to stay away from the cottage,” Sam told me.

Elaeya heard and gave me a reproachful side glance. She went to look further into the fridge and pantry, maybe to find something to make. I probably can't distinguish cooked from raw rice, and I'm not sure if spices are comestible or alchemy tools.

"Yeah, well, we need some food."

"You and me both, man."

"I thought you'd have eaten by now."

"Yeah, well, some asshole kicked us out, and I heard somewhere that it's rude to invite yourself to someone else's home to eat their food, dirty their dishes, and leave."

I pinched the bridge of my nose.

I had the feeling somehow that Elaeya really wanted to tell me off about this, but she stayed silent, her face deep in the pantry.

"Right," I said. "Well, let's just all eat. Is there a way to get wine, or more beer?"

"I can see what I can do. Are we allowed back in now?"

"Yes, you're allowed back in." I had the feeling he was enjoying this a little too much.

"Okay, I'll tell the guys and see about the food."

I put the phone back in my pocket, but it rang nearly instantaneously. It was her parents. I gave her the phone, and she had a brief conversation.

It didn't even take a full minute after she was done for the guys to get in.

Elaeya closed the pantry, as she was clearly not cooking tonight.

"Hello," she said politely to the guys.

They all said hi back.

"What are your names?" she asked.

"Anders."

"Stellan."

"…"

I looked at Brandon.

"What?" he asked me confused. "I told her before."

"Oh," I said.

She nodded.

"The food is coming," said Sam as he came in holding the bag that he came to put on the counter.

"That was fast," I said to him.

"I was expecting this," he said. He turned to Elaeya and winked at her, then turned to his bags.

He took out seven wine bottle from one, and started to take beer bottles out of the other.

"Man, you're a genius," said Stellan grabbing a brew, uncapping it, and swallowing half in one pull. While he did this, he grabbed a second bottle and gave it to Anders. He pretty much did the same. They looked like a pair of drunkards, extremely thirsty drunkards. I'm not sure what kind of image this gave of us.

"What is your name?" asked Elaeya.

"I'm Sam," he answered, offering her his hand.

She took it carefully. I'm pretty sure I saw Sam's eyes become bigger for a second there as their hand made contact, but I didn't want to bring it up in front of everyone.

"I hope that intimidating Neanderthal hasn't been too much of a bother?" he asked her, pointing his thumb at me.

I scoffed.

Brandon grabbed a beer and skedaddled out of the room followed by Anders and Stellan. There weren't many people willing to challenge me, or insult me. I'm pretty sure that on some level, I probably scared the vast majority of my own pack.

Sam was different. We've been to school together. He's one of the rare people that would be frank with me. I think it started around the time he realized he was gay. He was getting a lot of shit at school. He was a skinny little thing back then. I have the feeling he didn't bow down at my feet because he was sure his life couldn't get any worse. Actually, I think he might have even wanted me to destroy his face. But I couldn't care less. He was not insulting me for the fuck of it, just telling me what I needed to hear, uncensored. I actually appreciated this more than I thought I would.

I'm actually the one who dragged him around with me, which ended his bullying victim career.

By that time, I was already training pretty hard, and he decided to try and keep up with me. He's not from any fancy bloodline, there is no way he could ever match me in sheer strength. But then he began piling on muscles, and then piling some more. He became a pretty decent warrior. And then puberty hit him and he went from one of the smallest guy in our school to only a few inches smaller than me. He's one of the people I trust the most. He knows more about my life than my own siblings. He's reliable, and as a rule, I don't have to tell him much for

him to know what to do, or what is needed. He's seen me at my worst. He may not be a ranked member of any of my packs, but I rely on him more than any of them.

It took only a few minutes for a couple of people to bring us food.

I moved to the dining room. The three other guys emptied their beer and joined me.

Elaeya came in with dishes and silverware. Her eyes barely lingered on me as she came in, but I had a flash of that conversation about taking care after myself. So I got my fucking ass off my chair and helped her with putting the table.

The other guys went silent as I got up. Brandon rushed to put everything in place before I, or even Elaeya, had to do it. Sam came with wine glasses and wine.

Filet Mignon, asparagus, and Caesar salad were put on every plate while Sam made sure everyone had wine.

We got to eat.

Elaeya looked strangely at her glass for a few seconds.

"What is it?" asked Sam. "You'd prefer white?"

She looked up at him. "It is fine, I think."

"Think?" I asked as I took a bite.

"I do not know anything about wines. I never drank them."

"Never?" asked Stellan. "Do you prefer beer?"

"I never drank alcohol."

The three idiots on the other side of the table looked like they've been slapped in the face with a squirrel. Translation, they looked like dumbfounded imbeciles.

I guess if most of the things she's eaten came from what she could find in nature, it's not such a stretch to assume there's a lot of things she's never tried. I've yet to find a plantation of merlots, or whiskey.

I saw Stellan looking at her, opened his mouth to ask something, looked at me, then closed it.

The dinner was mostly quiet. Sam managed to stir a relatively simple conversation out of social potholes. Nothing exciting, just enough to not get drown in awkward silences.

Elaeya did try the wine.

Actually, the lot of us, went through all seven bottles. I decided this was easier than the long silences between me and her, and the conversation became a bit more casual. The wine probably helped.

She didn't go through as many cups of wine as we did though, but as I thought that, I could see her cheeks getting redder and redder. I could feel some dizziness that seemed to have nothing to do with my own wine consumption. I mean, werewolves have a pretty high alcohol tolerance. But maybe, she didn't.

— Chapter Sixteen —

PLENTY OF TEMPTING THINGS ARE POISONOUS

— Kaden —

She had been silent for a while now. All our plates were empty.

I called the end of the evening, and everyone got up.

Sam began piling plates and kicked Stellan, who got the gist of it, and the guys took everything back to the kitchen.

Elaeya was a little wobbly on her feet.

“Are you okay?” I asked, low enough so that with the dishes clanking in the kitchen, it would cover my voice, and the guys would not hear it.

“I’m not sure alcohol agrees with me,” she said.

“Are you gonna be sick?” I got closer, worried.

She shook her head, the gesture exaggerated, her hair floated around in its weightless quality. She hiccuped and grabbed the table for support.

“I just feel weird,” she said.

“I think this is the intended purpose of alcohol.”

“Mmmmmmmmh,” she said, stretching the sound a little too much and bent her head back to look at me. Well, she actually let her head fall back as far as it could, then tried to resettle the position a little.

“Maybe you should go to bed,” I suggested.

“I can’t sleep now,” she said, then looked around. “Where is everyone.”

“Going to bed.”

“Oh.”

“We can go and sit comfortably in the living room if you prefer.”

She nodded the gesture exaggerated still, as a child would.

“Is everything okay here?” asked Sam as he peeked around the corner. I couldn’t hear the others in the kitchen anymore. They had moved to their bedrooms.

“Yes,” said Elaeya as she twirled around and moved to the living room.

“I don’t think she drank that much,” muttered Sam to me low enough that she wouldn’t hear him.

“I know, maybe it’s a hybrid thing,” I said as low.

He nodded. “What type of hybrid?”

I shrugged.

We moved to the living room. Elaeya was getting slowly up the stairs.

Maybe bed was better after all.

Sam left for his bedroom and I went to help her up.

“I can walk,” she told me before I could do anything.

So I stayed behind her just in case she fell back. Besides she was holding her balance by pressing her hands on the walls on either side of her, so I couldn’t move pass her.

It took her a while to get to the upper floor, but I didn’t push.

“You’re okay with the rest?” I asked her as she got to her room.

She tilted her head a little confused at me, as she was getting in, but she seemed fine enough.

It’s only after I spent a full hour on my back in my bedroom that I finally realized what she had meant the other night.

I was tired, but I couldn’t sleep at all.

I went to the backyard to shift and took a run.

I hadn’t run like that in a while. It felt nice. I didn’t feel less tired though. I pushed myself, thinking exhaustion would help.

I got back in nearly an hour later. I was covered in sweat so I went for a quick shower then back to bed.

I did fall asleep after a fashion. But it didn’t last as long as I’d wanted. By three AM my night was over, sadly. So I decided I hadn’t trained in a while and went all out. By five Sam, Stellan and Anders joined me. But half an hour later my phone rang.

I went back in and took the call.

“Hello,” I said.

“Who is this?” asked a woman I never heard before.

“Kaden, Elaeya is not far, I’ll go get her,” I told who I assumed was her mother.

“You’re him?” she asked.

"I assumed I am." I got up the stairs to knock on her door.

The door opened before my hand connected with the wood. She didn't look as refreshed as she had looked the previous morning. I gave her the phone and she nodded her thanks.

Then I went to wash off the sweat and get clean clothes. I'm sure I was not looking as fresh as yesterday morning either. Actually, I'm sure I looked a lot worse than her. Well, technically, I think on my best day I look worse than her on her worse day.

It's not that I'm bad looking. Most women would probably prefer me without the scars though. A little smaller would probably make me a little less intimidating too. But she, she could probably make supermodel body-conscious.

Actually, I don't think I've seen a she-wolf look this good. Ever. Same with humans.

There are a few supernaturals who are gifted with incredible beauty though, so that could be it.

The thing with this is that, as a rule, anything too unnaturally pretty or ugly, by and large, means predators. Unnatural ugliness is generally a good way to scare people. A lot of things thrive of fear. Either they feed on it, or grow stronger with it, or just enjoy terrifying their preys. Typically, there is a ratio, the uglier it gets, the scarier it is. Like if the inner ugliness or monster-hood is reflected in its appearance. And there is a similar correlation with beauty. While ugliness repulses, beauty attracts. It's a great way to lure in prey, which is why it's often a tool of predation. Some of the most poisonous things in the world are attractive. There is a fruit called the little apple of death, and it smells like candy. Plenty of tempting things are poisonous.

Which, of course, got me thinking about the one in the room next to mine.

I was still unclear about how the mate bond backfired so epically on me. I don't think she did anything bad to me willingly. She got really upset at learning about it to beginning with, and her feelings looked sincere. But that doesn't mean that she didn't do anything subconsciously, or without even knowing it.

It's not because the fruit doesn't know it's poisonous that it means it isn't.

Yet, I still didn't even know what the hell she is.

And all I wanted was to bring her back with me. I wasn't sure if it was the bond talking, or just my dick, but I really wanted this.

But when I asked myself 'why', I couldn't have one clear answer.

It's like someone scrambled with my freaking brain.

I felt like I was getting blueballs at ten times the normal rate. All I could think of, when she was around, was to make sure whatever I would do would include her skin against mine. When she

sat on my lap the other day, part of my brain thought it would be fine if I became her official chair from then on. Which does not sound like anything a sane person would ever think.

The closer she was, the harder it was to connect with my reason.

All I could do at the moment was to go along for the ride and wait to see where this will lead to. It was not like she seemed to know what she would do either. And I don't think her mother is particularly keen on seeing her daughter go.

The second my mind brushed on the concept of us falling apart, I felt my guts twist hard enough that for a second there I thought I would puke.

What the hell?

As the day went, she decided she was okay with taking a walk, as she had no idea how pack operated, so I gave her a rough tour. Not in the sense that it was short, but more in the sense than I didn't know that much about Monaweard. But I could answer plenty of general questions about packs. Actually, we didn't talk that much about ourselves, and it felt mostly like a crash course into werewolf society.

She seemed to absorb knowledge pretty well though.

When we got back to the cottage for lunch, Brandon had monopolised the dining table with files and his laptop, and he looked pretty busy, so we ate at the kitchen counter. Microwaves being the only kitchen appliance I know how to use—that and a coffee machine—I was fine with more leftovers that had been brought to us.

I don't remember ever having that much time on my hands since I hit puberty.

We managed to spend the rest of the day without any uneasy moment, and actually, the more we talked the better it got.

I guess trying too hard to focus on what is not part of our reality—like hobbies—made it weirder. So there was a lot of talk about work, the things we do every day, our families. The little things. I didn't try too hard to get information about her bloodline as I didn't want to get this back into uncomfortable territory.

She got a call from her parent at sunset, but soon after that, I was barely able to keep my eyes open.

Last night I thought it would have been wrong of me to get in her room as she was pretty drunk, but when she got to her room and opened her door wider for me to get in, I let out an immense internal sigh of relief I didn't know I'd been withholding.

This time I went for comfort and changed into sweats and a shirt first.

When I got into her room she was already in bed, so I closed behind me and joined her.

Yet again I fell asleep in an instant, right next to her, for what could possibly be the last time.

— Chapter Seventeen —

WHAT IS TO COME

—Kaden —

When the phone rang this time, I woke up.

I took it from the nightstand and gave it straight to Elaeya without looking at it. I was lying on my side with her nested in my arms, her face pressed against my chest.

I could have slept a few more hours, at least.

When she answered, the tone of her voice said pretty much the same thing. She didn't move away from me. She just put the phone against her ear. I could feel her breath through my shirt. I just took a long pull of her scent and closed my eyes.

"Yes," she said.

"It is the last morning," said her mother.

"I know."

"It is time to return."

"…"

"Ela, it is not that simple."

"Is it?"

"You are young, there are still so many things you do not know."

"I know."

"No, you do not. You don't know the door you're about to open," her mother said. "There are doors that once opened, cannot be closed."

"I know."

"No, you do not. You think you know. You are feeling really intense things right now. Things that don't delve in the land of reason. Overwhelming things that can lead you where you never thought you would."

"I know."

"I do not think you understand—."

"No," said Elaeya. "I think you do not understand."

"Ela, it is not—."

“What has your instincts told you?”

“…”

“I know what they told you, and it scared you. It scares me too. I do not know what it means, I do not know what is to come, but I know that I will need him as he needs me.”

“Are you sure?” asked her father.

“I know that if I do not go, I will probably die.”

“…”

What did she mean?

I looked down at her, but her forehead was against my chest, her face down. I couldn’t see her expression.

“I do not know if I can do this.” There were deep emotions in that voice, it cracked under the weight of something that was too much to bear. “I do not know if I can do what is expected of me. There is too much that I do not know. Too much that I do not understand. All that I know is that I must, but I do not get why, or how.” I could feel a few wet blotches grow in the middle of my shirt. “I know that if I fail, the consequences will have far-reaching ramifications. I do not want to mess up, but I do not know how. I know the risks, I know the price and it terrifies me.”

The three of them stayed wordless for a while.

“Do what you feel is best, and we will accept,” her father told her.

I heard a sound in the background that translated to me as her mother being highly uncomfortable with this decision.

“I will go.”

I never thought three small words could affect me this much. I wanted to hug her, kiss her, do something, anything, but I stayed unmoving with my arms loosely around her.

I’m pretty sure I heard her mother pleaded with a heartbreaking ‘No,’ in the distance.

“We will talk again,” her father said.

“You could come,” Elaeya suggested. “He offered.”

There was a pause. “Maybe in time,” he said.

“I understand.”

“I know you do. I would like to keep contact every day if possible.”

“Maybe noon would be easier,” she suggested, her voice a little more stable now.

“It would be wonderful. Be careful, child.”

“You too.”

“Bye.”

“Bye.”

And that was it.

She gave me back my phone without looking at me.

“Are you okay?” I asked her.

She nodded silently.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

She shook her head. “Maybe later.”

“Okay,” I said. “I don’t want to rush you, and if you want to stay longer, I can ask Mariqueen about it, but I doubt I can stay here for long.”

She looked up this time.

“You have to go. You cannot wait. Things are unfolding and you will be needed.”

Her eyes were wet but her cheeks were dry. Her voice had it’s assurance back.

“What is unfolding?” I asked her.

She shrugged.

I took my phone and sent a message to Brandon to get the plane here and ready as soon as possible. He would organize what we needed.

— Elaeya —

We did not linger in bed for long.

We had breakfast and I asked him to ask Mariqueen to return my clothes.

She came not long after with a package.

“Here are your clothes,” she told me as she gave them to me once we were in my room. “Here some more clothes.” She piled some on the bed.

I looked at her in confusion.

“Where you’re going, things will be expected of you. You can’t go there with just one outfit.” She gave me a small bag. “Take those clothes, and the one I lent you, and the cosmetics, the toothbrush, everything. I’m sure he can buy you anything you want but, in the meantime, you will have the basics. Make sure you look your best before you board that plane, because even if the flight may be long, and even if he might not ask anything out of you yet. The moment you

will step out of that plane, you will have to do it like a Luna. First impressions matters, make it count. This is probably the best piece of advice I can ever tell you. Maybe you're happy, or excited, or confused, or emotionally unprepared. Whatever you're feeling, when you're in public you're a Luna, the rest comes after."

"There is no middle ground?" I asked her.

"No. And the bigger the pack, the more prevalent this is."

"How big is Blakemore?" I asked her.

She reeled from my question, clearly surprised.

She thought about it before answering me.

"If you would have come here to be Luna, you would have had a reception similar to becoming the mayoress of a small town. When you walk on Blakemore land, consider yourself the Queen of England."

I froze horrified.

"So it is big?" I dared asked.

"I haven't seen bigger," she said. "Or stronger, or more influential. They're probably in the top ten or five richest on the planet too."

I'm pretty sure my eyes bulged at this.

He said he was 'loaded', but there is a difference between that and top ten world-wide.

"What did he tell you?" she asked me.

We sat on the bed, the clothes left untouched.

"He mostly explained to me what packs are, how they function, and what is the role of Alpha."

She looked strangely at me.

"I did not know any of this," I explained. "Your land is the first packland I ever walked on."

"Then you're gonna have a pretty steep learning curve. Get all the resources and knowledge you can. There are some etiquette classes, plenty of books on werewolf society and behaviours, I'm sure he can get you whatever you want. You might want to talk to his mother if she's still around. Former Lunas are a great source of information. You can call me too, if you have questions."

"Thank you," I said.

"I know it's a lot, but you'll get through it."

"The Queen of England?" I muttered in terror at her.

“Pretty much.”

I shook my head, and she helped me pack everything.

We all took a quick bite late in the morning. Mariqueen and her husband joined us, then we went to the plane just before noon.

I got really uncomfortable about my passport situation, but Kaden told me it had been taken care of, that we were going from a private strip to another, and that he would take care of it once on Blakemore Territory.

In the plane, Kaden suggested taking a nap before things got hectic back home, and I agreed. I was not expecting a private bedroom in a plane though.

I got really uncomfortable at takeoff, and I found the engine deafening, but he gave me earplugs and wrapped me in his arm, and soon enough, the sensation of motion stopped bothering me, and I fell asleep.

— Chapter Eighteen —

THE LAND OF HIS FOREFATHERS

— Elaeya —

I slept surprisingly well, though I found the landing a little jarring and my ears kept popping. I never expected air travel to be such a strange experience.

I went inside the small bathroom once we landed and tried to straighten out, thinking of what Mariqueen told me.

On the tarmac, there were two cars. Sam drove Kaden and I, and Brandon, Stellan, and Anders got in the other.

The forest was beautiful. The trees had massive trunks, their old age written in their bark. The land was well kept and cared for. There was an energy here than I never felt before. I let it brush against my skin like millions of spiderwebs. I could feel a resonance between Kaden and the land. Certainly, being Alpha gave him a link to his people and land. I didn't know the extent of this link or its power, but it radiated from him—his aura more defined, stronger, his power palpable.

I closed my eyes, I looked at this world through my inner eyes. I looked at the metaphysical imprint of the land. I looked through my inner senses at the shape of the past. I felt ancestry here. I knew Kaden has had an anchor here for many generations. This was the land of his forefathers.

"We're nearly here," Kaden told me, softly. Probably thinking I was sleeping again.

I opened my eyes.

Before me, stood the biggest mansion I've ever seen with my own two eyes. It had origins in many different eras but was pieced together with great taste. There was an enormous decorative lake with fountains of water in the center, and the yard was cloaked in a series of beautiful flower beds.

We went pass the house to the backyard, which was equally grand and vast. A few buildings were there. Most similarly luxurious. Furthest from them was a beautiful cottage shrouded in trees. There were old vines growing amongst them and against the walls. The aged stones of the facade, well cared for.

Sam parked in front. He opened my door, and went to the trunk to pick our luggage.

I went to help, but Kaden grabbed my hand before then and dragged me to the door.

“This is my house,” he told me. He opened a very large black wooden door to a beautiful entry hall. There was a massive chandelier above us, and the walls were painted in muted greys. “Many Alphas live inside the packhouse. My family used to live there too, but things were a little hectic there, and I decided to move here.”

“It is beautiful.”

He smiled. We took our footwear off while Sam took our things inside and Kaden gave me a quick tour.

The house was decorated with taste. It was evident that everything was of quality and probably extravagantly priced, but it was not gaudy, and surprisingly subdued. There was a very masculine sophistication to the colour palette—a lot of rich browns, and darker colours, wood, and exposed metals.

There was food already waiting for us on the table, warm and served in two plates, but I couldn’t see who had prepared it.

Sam put our luggage upstairs, bid us farewell, and left.

We went to eat. Steak, asparagus, and celeriac. It was exquisite.

Halfway through dinner, someone knocked at the door.

Kaden raised his hand towards me in a gesture meaning that I didn’t need to get up and went to the door.

“She’s here?” asked a female voice.

“Who’s here?” asked Kaden.

“Your mate, who else?”

“And how do you know about her?”

“Why didn’t you tell me? I should have been the first to know. We could have prepared a proper welcoming party.”

“Mom, we’re tired. It was a long flight. No welcoming party.”

“Maybe tomorrow. I can wipe out something in a jiffy.”

“Mom, mom, stop,” he had to cut her a few times. “She’s a stray. She never saw packland in her life. This is a lot for her and I don’t want you scaring her off.”

“I’m not going to—.”

“She needs time to adapt. I don’t want her running off because you’re making this too overwhelming for her.”

There was a short pause before she answered.

“I just want to welcome her in the family.”

“I know, but we just met. It’s not like we’re married. She left her parents behind. She’s taking a pretty big jump, let’s not make this more than it is. Give her time.”

“Sure, but you can’t keep her away from me forever.”

“That’s not what I’m asking. Just a few days, at least.”

“Days? Are you crazy? Days? Tomorrow is Friday. You come for dinner. You know the rule. Bring her. If you don’t I’ll drag both your asses home, you get me?”

“Mom.”

“Don’t Mom me Kaden Devon. I’m gonna see that girl or I’ll spank your ass.”

“Since when are you into spanking?”

“Don’t ask your mother questions you don’t want to hear the answer of.”

“Urgh! Leave, just leave.”

“Tomorrow,” she threatens, then I heard the door close and lock.

Kaden came back into the dining room pinching the bridge of his nose with a strange sickly expression on his face.

I tried really hard to suppress a smile.

It was difficult, but by the time he sat down and resumed his meal, my expression was back under control.

“Your mother?” I asked.

“Of course you heard,” he muttered.

“Shouldn’t I?” I asked.

He shook his head.

“What rule is about Fridays?” I asked.

“If I’m home, I eat dinner at my parents every Friday. That was the only rule for me to leave home and move here, to begin with. It makes my Mom happy, so the tradition stayed. I’m not often around, but whenever I am, I go there on Friday evening.”

I nodded.

“If you’re not ready for this, you don’t have to come. We can always make sure to not be around tomorrow evening. She cannot do anything about that.”

“But then there would be spanking,” I said hardly restraining a giggle.

He smiled. “She can try.”

“Maybe we should not tempt fate,” I suggested, still smiling.

“Maybe,” he conceded.

We talked a little through the evening. He told me more of the history of this place, his family until well past midnight.

He guided me to what would be my room, and I saw him hesitate by the door. I nodded, he went to change clothes and he came to join me a few minutes later in bed, but this time, he slipped under the covers.

* * * * *

I woke up in heaven.

This was probably the most comfortable mattress in the world. If I kept sleeping on something like this, I would, potentially, never be able to sleep on anything else ever again.

There was a hot furnace next to me, the crisp air of the late summer morning had taken over the room, as a window had been left open all through the night, and I snuggle closer to the heat source.

When I finally opened my eyes, I saw Kaden with his eyes half-closed looking at me with a smile.

“Good morning gorgeous,” he told me.

I faltered at the compliment. “Good morning.”

He wrapped his arms tighter around me, which was even more comfortable.

“Maybe we should get up,” I suggested without much enthusiasm.

“Maybe we should,” he said. But he didn’t move.

It took us maybe half an hour to get the courage to get up, but we did, washed in our respective bathrooms, and prepared for the day.

When I walked down, there was breakfast already prepared and served, and the cook was mysterious in hes absence.

There was a delivery a few hours later and Kaden gave it to me after bringing it in.

I looked at him confused.

“It’s for you,” he said.

“I don’t think—,” I began mystified.

“I ordered it for you.”

I blinked.

“You need this, so just open it and say thank you.”

“Thank you,” I muttered and did as was asked.

Inside there was a brand new cellphone in its box. It was a lot more expensive than the one my family owned.

Kaden helped me put the Sim card inside, and I booted it.

“I thought you might want to have your own phone instead of always borrowing mine,” he told me.

“I can’t pay this back,” was all I found to answer.

“I’m not asking you to.”

I looked down at the phone still unsure.

There were a few cases in the shipping box too, earbuds, and other accessories.

“Thank you,” I mumbled again a few minutes later. “What kind of plan this has?” I asked him.

“You don’t have to worry about plans, or long distances.”

I nodded.

I spent most of my morning setting the phone and putting a few apps in. It was the first time I had one of my own. At noon, I called a few minutes early, so that my parents would not call on Kaden’s phone and I gave them my number.

After lunch, Kaden put a laptop in front of me, opened on a page with a series of women wear.

“Put anything you want in the basket,” he told me.

I bit my lower lip, unsure.

“You need clothes, and all kinds of stuff. You can pick whatever you want, the credit card is already on there.”

“I cannot do that,” I told him.

“I’m already paying my sisters every luxuries they may want, and they want a lot. This is not going to affect my credit score, don’t worry. I can pay a hundred times for what you want.”

“That is not what I mean,” I said.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“That is… I cannot be this dependent,” I tried to explain.

“You can get your own money if you want later, but you still need things to wear.”

I bit my lower lip again.

He gave me a stare and a caved. I spent hours on there but it was a lot harder than I would have thought. I'm used to being more utilitarian in my choice of clothes. A lot of them came from donation boxes, whatever could be found for as little money as possible, if none.

In some way this was not different, I was not paying for it, but those were brand new. I could choose colour, size, design, there were so many choices that I got lost in simply looking at all that was available out there. I'm not even sure I know how to properly shop, how to find the exact size, how to choose which cut would be advantageous to my silhouette. This was a completely alien process to me.

And all the while, I kept thinking that someone that I barely knew was paying for it. He was right that I needed clothes and probably plenty of other things too, but I felt so bad for just mooching off him. And the prices were unusually high too.

I was glad to stop when dinner time came, until I remembered it was to meet his family.

— Chapter Nineteen —

I AM FROM NOWHERE

— Kaden —

I managed to dodge my sisters throughout the day. I'm pretty sure Jasmine was paying anyone she could to get tea on Elaeya, so I had to limit the access to my home from the staff, just so I could err on the safe side.

A part of me wanted to think it would be easier after tonight, but I've never been strong on self-deluding.

Elaeya was wearing that same white dress she'd been wearing that first day in that little cottage. She had braided the upper part of her hair in intricate meshes, the rest falling loosely over her shoulders and down her back, the tips ending in big natural curls. She was beautiful.

I'd spend years thinking something might've been wrong with my mate, then thinking that I'd waited so long that I was ready to accept a lot, roll with it, whatever would be difficult we could maybe work through it. But when I saw her, like now, I just can't wrap my head around what I ended up with. They say your mate is tailored for you, but this seems off to me. I don't think I ever did anything to warrant this. Which makes me think there must be something royally wrong and I just haven't found it yet. No one gets good karma like this, especially not me. But as I watched her come to join me at the door to walk to my parents' house together, I couldn't stop myself from thinking that she might have been worth the wait.

I saw the curtains ruffle as we got close to my parents' place. Sheesh.

I felt Elaeya tense up a little beside me. I gave the door a couple of knocks and slipped in.

I dumped my boots by the wall and she put her flats right beside them. I could see Jasmine up the stairs staring through the bars of the handrails. I ignore her pointedly.

We could hear voices on the other side of the door.

The sounds nearly died down as I walked through to the dining room with Elaeya behind me.

"Is she here?" asked me Gwen nervously, then she spotted her. "Oh, wow."

"You are absolutely gorgeous," said my mother to her as she came in for a hug. "What is your name, sweetie?"

"Elaeya."

"How exotic, just like you," she told her, looking her up and down. "Hybrid," she noted taking a whiff. "I never smelled this before though. What kind of hybrid?"

I saw Elaeya squirm the slightest.

“Let’s just eat. Shall we?” I told them, hoping to shut this trail of thought.

I noticed my father’s eyes were a little wide, looking at her. He had much better knowledge of the supernatural world than me, maybe he recognized something I didn’t.

Giving his reaction, I wasn’t sure this was good, or bad. We’d have to talk later I guess.

Most eyes were on her. I wasn’t sure what I could do to ease things up.

“Don’t worry,” said Darren to her in an undertone. “I know they can look a little intimidating, but they’re quite decent.”

Elaeya tilted her head inquisitively at him.

“I’m the latest addition. Well, before you. I’m Darren, Eva’s mate—Kaden’s younger sister,” he explained and extended his hand to her.

She took it.

“Are we that intimidating?” asked Eva in a mutter, coming next to him.

“A little,” he conceded and winked at Elaeya.

“Glad to meet you,” said Eva to her, shaking her hand in turn.

I hadn’t realized Darren could actually be of help here, but I was glad he was at this dinner. He was the only one present who could really get what it was to be an outsider. I guess Mom could too, to an extent, but she’s been part of this family for so long, that she might not relate as well as she would have.

I gave looks whenever I felt stupid questions coming her way. Some of my sisters were very capable of being socially adept, but others. I’m not sure there was a desire to even try.

I guess spoiling kid has its downsides.

We got to dinner, moving through a series of light topics, mostly it was Jasmine, Amy and Gwen talking.

“Where are you from?” asked my father after a while.

“Not anywhere in particular,” replied Elaeya.

“Everyone is from somewhere,” pointed my mother.

“If we are to get technical, then I am from nowhere,” she answered.

“That’s impossible,” remarked Lisa.

“I do not have a birth certificate. Which means I am not only no citizen of any country, but it also means that I do not legally exist anywhere in the world.”

“Why wouldn’t you have a birth certificate?” asked Lisa.

“Because it was never requested and filed.”

“But why?”

“I’m sure we can take care of that here,” interjected my father, cutting off that line of questioning.

We managed to keep the questions to a minimum. I could feel the tension coming from her. Her posture was straight and perfectly rigid, and proper, I suppose.

“Who talks like that?” asked Jasmine at Elaeya all of a sudden, as she was answering a question my mother was asking about the meal.

Everyone looked up at Jasmine. I swear this girl has issues.

“I mean, no one speaks like that,” she said waving her hand at Elaeya.

“How?” asked Lisa.

“It’s too grammatically correct. Do you ever use contractions?”

“Sometimes,” said Elaeya a little aghast.

“Well, I don’t think I’ve heard you say any.”

“You can’t be blaming her for your own vocabulary limitations,” I told her.

“See, you talk like that sometimes too. But she talks like that all the time. And no one pronounces things like this.”

“It’s called good diction. You could try it sometime,” said Eva.

“Okay, children. This is enough,” interjected Mom.

Elaeya looked horrified. Darren looked like he was watching a particularly fun wrestling match.

“Jass, you’re a bitch sometimes,” said Nadine.

“WHAT?” screamed Jasmine.

Mom looked like she’d just been slapped in the face. Dad decided he was not getting involved and just went back to eating. And everything looked about to devolve into chaos.

“ENOUGH!” I put every authority in it, and a growl resonated all through the word. Dishes clanked, and the light fixture started to sway, giving an eerie feel to the scene. “I think this dinner is over,” I said, softer this time, but there was an edge there I knew none of them would challenge.

I put my utensil down.

Elaeya looked in horror like she'd just realized she was the cause of World War III.

"You don't have to leave," pleaded my mother.

"Jasmine," was all my father said.

"I'm sorry," she buckled. "I just meant she doesn't have to talk like a Luna at home. She can talk normally to us."

Eleaya blinked at that. "Ehm, I simply talk this way," she said quietly.

"Oh," was all Jasmine had for answer.

"Actually, I'd like to have a chat with you before you leave," told me my father. I nodded, but stopped halfway and looked at Elaeya still under shock at the turn of events.

The dinner had been more or less over anyways, but maybe I should get her back home.

"How about Darren and I give you a tour of the place?" suggested Eva.

"If you want to go home, we can do that another time," I told her.

She looked at my father. There was something strange in her eyes, but she shook her head. "I am fine. Go talk with him. I can visit."

Eva clapped her hands, happily, and coaxed Elaeya away. I looked at her a little unsure, but Darren slipped by me. "Don't worry, I'll rail her in if necessary, but I don't think it will be."

I looked at them leaving, then I move to my father's study with him.

Looking at his face, I had the feeling I was not going to like that talk.

— Chapter Twenty —

BLACKER THAN BLACK

— Kaden —

I dropped my ass on the leather sofa in my father's office.

My father closed the door and leaned against his desk, his arms crossed.

"What's going on?" I asked him.

"Well, first, Nubinero," he said. "I don't know where you got your information, but they were pretty on point. Things were rigged. We would have been sucker-punched in the face if it hadn't been for your warning. And if I didn't know to look further, we would probably have taken everyone down. They were some shady individuals, the Brotherhood took them. They'll have a trial. For whatever good it will do them. The rest of the population was pretty well controlled. I left the Brotherhood to decide what to do with them, but I left forces to occupy the land and keep everything under control.

We found no more artifacts in their village. I have the feeling the Brothers with us were a little too keen on finding something. They weren't exactly happy we found nothing," he told me.

I nodded.

"The Brotherhood might contact us on the follow-ups for Greysky and Akayume. They're pissed you went on your own to take Nubinero down, but at the same time, they're absolutely fine with having one less problematic pack out there. Those idiots are perpetually unsatisfied."

"You're preaching to the choir," I told him.

He nodded.

"Your little mate decided to come after all," he noted.

"Yeah," I said. "It wasn't without challenges, but yeah, she's here now. I don't know what it means between us yet, though."

He nodded.

"You know she's a hybrid?" he asked.

"Any wolf can smell that."

"Do you know a hybrid of what?"

"That's the million-dollar question." I sighed.

"She hasn't told you?"

“She’s not really forthcoming about telling me.”

“You said her father gave you a time limit. You met her parents?”

“Her father, yes.”

“Did he have white hair like hers?”

“That I can’t know, he was shifted when I met him.”

“So you didn’t talk.”

“Oh, we talked alright.”

My father looked at me puzzled.

“You remember the children’s stories about demon-wolves?” I asked him.

“Yeah. Those are supposed to scare kids into being obedient but you kept asking us how you could learn to become one,” he said with a wry smile.

“Well, I think I met one. Or at least the closest thing to one that is out there.”

“Her father?” his eyebrows irked up.

“Massive. At least as big as me, if not bigger. Black fur. Not melanistic black, but like light can’t be refracted black. Red eyes. Not glowing, but blood red. He smelt werewolf for sure, but not like us. My best guess would be a different breed. Oh, and it talked. While shifted.”

My father’s eyes popped out at that.

“I didn’t even know it could be done,” I said.

“I read of a few accounts, but none have ever been verified,” he said looking through his library. “I think this is one of the rarest skills a werewolf can develop. But that would require a tremendous amount of strength and mastery to perform.”

“Elaeya said her father was from a normal family, normal bloodline, but he developed far beyond that. She called him a Made-Alpha. Said he wasn’t a Blood-Alpha. She said that’s really rare.”

“Oh, yes. It is.” He plucked a few books out of his massive library. “She said anything about his pack?”

“That they were isolationists and traditionalists. There was some discord within the pack. The Alpha saw a problem in her father, challenged him, and lost, so he murdered him in the night and got rid of the corpse. Only her father survived, and left.”

“Freaking amateur Alphas,” my father grumbled.

He put a couple of books on the coffee table in front of me, and sat next to me.

"Here, there's a chapter on Made-Alphas." He flipped through the pages. "So mostly what it says is that genetics is not the only factor in Alpha-level capabilities. Which is why not all Alphas are the same too, even within a single family, with the same blood. It mostly speaks of innate capabilities and blood capabilities. When they combine, they make very strong Alphas, but one alone can be enough, and develop quite high. But most get a good average between the two. So that guy's innate abilities must be astounding to beat blood abilities of another."

"It's beyond that. I'm not sure I'd want to have a face-off with that guy."

"Really? That's interesting," he thought aloud. "So she's not from a long line of Alphas, but she does have powerful Alpha genes."

"Does it carry over when he didn't get it from genetic himself?" I asked him.

"I think so," he said, scratching his shin. "Has for the demon wolf part. I think this is what you saw." He flipped open another book. "To your credit, a lot of black dogs and demon wolf stories come from them."

Inja Emnyama I read.

"What language is this?"

"Zulu, I think."

"I didn't think there were many wolves in Africa."

"Not much. I think the Injas migrated there at some point, but from what I read they're mostly on islands now. Very isolationists. They got a lot into breading with non-werewolf at some point in history which could explain some of their wilder abilities, but it could be bollocks. History is not as reliable as we'd like it to be."

"What kind of things they bred with?"

"There are rumours of Yumboes. They might have had some involvement with Azizas. Both are like African faeries. But it could also be just rumours."

"Are they still in Africa?"

"Nah. It's mostly been only werehyenas there anyways. They might've passed through at some point, but they didn't stay. They might've bread with werehyenas though. It's probably one of the most plausible rumours."

"But they're mostly wolf?"

"Yes. Just a different breed."

"Injas," I thought aloud.

"They are known for their red eyes and fur blacker than black."

"They all have black fur?"

"Few don't."

I nodded.

"Do you know where they are now?"

He shrugged. "They're not known to be very friendly to strangers. I think there are some insular communities between Africa and South Asia, but don't quote me on that."

I nodded. "Okay. So that's the werewolf part. I guess you asked me about white hair for a reason?"

He twitched his left eyebrow and got up again to his books.

"Have you met her mother?" he asked me.

"No. I know she's a hybrid too though."

He turned to me slowly, his eyes big. "Are you sure?"

"She said her grandfather was … she didn't use the term Alpha, so I guess it's not a werewolf community, but that he was the one in charge. But he and his wife had an open relationship and that her mother was born of such a relationship. He and his wife raised her as their own, but kept quiet that she was a hybrid, because hybrids were really not popular in that community."

My father returned with half a dozen books and laid them before me.

"Just so you know, I'm not an expert at this. This is a pretty obscure part of supernatural history," he opened a book and flipped through. "She does have pink eyes, right?"

"Yeah, pretty striking ones at that," I admitted.

"The tip of her hair is bi-coloured," he muttered while reading and flipping pages, looking for something.

"Yes."

"Did you notice anything … spooky, about her?" he asked.

"Like what?"

"I don't know, abilities you're not used to seeing?"

"Do you mean the fact that no one seems to be able to look away when she's in a room? Or how anyone, and not just me, tends to react to the slightest physical contact with her? How her eyes look like they could hypnotize anyone? How she has insights which are like a mix between visions and elaborated knowledge-filled instincts that tell her things, including about the future? How she can look at someone's actual soul? How her eyes can turn moonstones-looking when she's having visions? How light seems to refract abnormally on her skin, like it was

always bordering on shimmering which makes her skin pretty hard to miss even in half-light? I'm sure there's more and I haven't seen all that she can do."

My father had frozen, listening to me intently. Then he grabbed another book and threw it on my lap.

Vaettiraï was written on the cover.

"What language is that?" I asked.

"I don't think it's a language that is still talked today."

I flipped it open.

"I don't think I can read that," I said.

"There are some pages translated."

"*The land of the spirit-talkers*," I read aloud. I looked at my father.

"Here." He gave me another book.

"Spirit wolves," I read this time.

"That's what our people called them."

"I never heard of a spirit wolf," I said.

"That's because they are thought to be instinct."

"But you think Elaeya is one?"

"I think she's a hybrid of one," he corrected me.

"Okay," I said closing the books. "Ball-park it for me."

— Chapter Twenty-One —

THE GREATEST GIFT AND THE WORST CURSE

— Kaden —

My father nodded.

“Okay, from what I saw, spirit wolves are rare, but have not always been so. They are distinguished by their white hair on their head, but that does not cover all their body like an albino. They have two predominant eye colour, either a very pale pink, or violet—I believed I’ve seen the term lilac being used somewhere,” he told me.

“White hair, not tricoloured?” I asked.

“One of the main signs of hybridization seems to be visible in the tip of their hair gaining a different colour.”

“Oh, okay. That tracks.”

He nodded. “They are known to have a strong connection with spirits, ancestors, land, incorporeal beings, nature, the list goes on. They were known mostly to be the communicator between the living and the dead. Between the corporeal and incorporeal. Many were seers, and were versed in divination. They were often summoning beings from the neither, guardian spirits of forests, that type of thing.

They got the attention of werewolf society around the time of Romulus and Remus. Later, Romans really got into getting one or two of them in their packs. They were the ones guiding the spiritual aspect of society. Back in the days when spirituality was such a big thing, being capable of doing what they could was huge.

Some stories said they could allow one to talk with the gods.

As their popularity grew, it turned into a sort of gold rush to get your pack one. A lot of their tribes were attacked. Many were sold as slaves. Most packs treated them well, but it didn’t change the facts that they stole most of them, oftentimes as babies even, to take them away from their homes.

Some of their tribes made pacts with our kind, trying to control at least where the children were going, and also to keep some of their population so that they would not breed themselves out.

That’s around the time when the term Luna came to be. Spirit wolves had a reputation of being particularly beautiful, and a lot of Alphas married them. Well, back then, we were not called Alphas—I think the most common term I’ve seen would translate to chieftains. But Lunas

became a thing then. Only back then Lunas were exclusively spirit wolves, I believe. It's just that the term stuck and changed meaning with time.

Anyways, it's also around the time when experimentations with interbreeding were becoming a thing. But as you know, hybrids of all kinds tend to not end well for most. A lot of younglings are deformed or feral. It's always easier when there is human blood involved, but still. Though, for the, it's not the case, and there are fewer chances of stillbirth too."

"Just not as strong," I noted.

"Generally so," he admitted. "Which is also why spirit wolves grew in popularity. It doesn't happen with them."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I'm not sure how this works—all texts were written before the discovery of genetics and DNA—but apparently, they don't have bad side-effects. They intermix perfectly. With anything."

My eyebrows went up.

"Not only that, but their woman didn't seem to have many birthing issues either, the pregnancies much safer than any others. So do keep in mind that there were periods in history were one baby out of two would die, and women prepared their possible funerals every time they got pregnant."

"But not spirit she-wolves?" I guessed.

"No. Not only that, but some text suggests that the young would not inherit half-legacies."

"What do you mean?" I asked him.

"You know how every child gets fifty percent of their DNA from each parent, right?"

"Sure."

"Well, I don't know how this translates into modern terms, but apparently their children don't inherit half of their parent's potential, but all of it."

"That doesn't make sense."

"I know, and I don't know if it's the truth or not, but what I know is that they believed it to be true."

"Ah, which meant they went all-in into acquiring some and trying this out," I suggested.

"Pretty much. If they'd been hunted before, it was nothing until the word got out about this. Especially the women. Many of their tribes ended women-less and died out this way. And it also got a lot of people nervous because generally, mixing blood meant that there was always a limit to what the child would inherit…"

"But not this time," I finished.

"Not this time," he confirmed. "Some groups went pretty hardcore into eliminating all possible threats. At some points, any hybrids were killed, no matter the results, but spirit wolf hybrid had a pretty high reward on their heads. It became so dangerous that most would not associate with them, even their own kind. They were more feared than the plague. But some zealot decided that taking all spirit wolves altogether would take care of any possible future threat too."

"Which is why they are believed to be instinct now," I guessed. "Either they mostly are, or they pretend they are, not to attract any attention to them."

"It's as good a guess as any. Plus there is the little thing that they are believed to be more magically infused than a lot of other creatures, so selling their body parts on the black market for potions and the like became a big thing."

"Like with dragons?"

"Sorta, yes. I read some pretty disturbing things in there. I found one guy describing how to cut the limbs off, tongue, eyes, teeth, hair, anything sellable, while keeping the host alive. How to breed with it, and how much blood to take and sell without killing it. It's nightmare fuel."

"And things like these were common?" I asked a little queasy.

"I don't know how common," my father told me. "I know that there was a time when ceremonies were performed with seven candidates when a spirit she-wolf was pregnant with a girl, and one of the males would develop a bond, not unlike our mates, and then he'd be allowed to take her. And for a long time, it was seen as one of the greatest blessing a wolf and a pack could be given. That is until the hunting got so bad that having one in their midst had become known as an unavoidable death sentence, because it was pretty much a guaranteed they would be attacked for it. With time, only the strongest or the biggest fool tried this.

They have been victims of a lot of experimentation too, some supernaturals had them raped and forced breeding with all sorts of monstrous things just to see what would happen, and they would take the young from the mothers at birth, never to be seen again.

So I'm not exactly surprised if she's truly a spirit wolf, that she's not really keen on broadcasting the information."

"Man," I said, gliding my hands over my face.

"I know that right now, she would be worth a pretty penny on the black market. And contrary to other species, her being a hybrid, would only make her that more valuable," my father said. "And if what you said is true, and she's a second-generation hybrid. Man, those are even rarer. Especially if the other part is something different. The bigger the mix, the higher the value."

"Does it means she's powerful?" I asked him.

“Possibly. But again, all this could be bullshit superstitions from the past. We don’t really know.”

“But if the information gets out, superstitions or not, it might not matter,” I said.

“No, because value is all about perception.”

“Damn,” I said.

“They are seen as the greatest gift and the worst curse. Which means that to some, you’re the luckiest and most blessed guy on the planet, and to others, you’re utterly fucked.”

“And right now, there is a bunch of assholes in the Brotherhood who think I might have started a war just to go magical artifact shopping and buildup power.”

“Oh, yeah. I’m sure they’ll be thrilled to know you got yourself something even better than that. They love it when someone is not obedient, docile, and power gathering.”

I laughed humourlessly.

“So, what will you do with her?” my father asked me.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, you could be borrowing a lot of trouble by having her around. You still have the option of not going with it. You can reject her and move on. You could also go for a power grab, this would be an excellent time for this.”

“No,” I said. “On both accounts. I’m not gonna bend over because some people might not like someone. I never did this and I never will. And second, a power grab is not something that I can just do for myself for fun. There would be repercussions for this, for my pack, for her, for my family. It’s not worth it.”

My father nodded. “It’s all nice and stuff, but that might not be how things will go.”

“I know.”

“You love her?”

“I barely know her.”

“Yes, but you could be heading through hell for her.”

“Maybe, maybe not. I don’t think I’m considered weak. No one in their right mind would attack here just for fun.”

“Probably not,” he said with a smirk.

“Maybe this is the best place for her to be safe.”

“Maybe,” he conceded.

“She said that I needed her and she needed me, and that if she didn’t come with me, she might possibly die.”

“A vision?”

“Something like this.”

“You think that’s why she needs you, why she might die?”

“It’s as good a guess as any,” I admitted.

“Do you know why you need her?”

I shrugged. “I don’t have details. But I do know that my soul has been damaged, and she helps heal it.”

My father’s eyes widened. “How?”

“I’m not sure, and I don’t think she really understands what has happened either. I think it might have been linked to how she affected me before we met. She said my soul is brittle and could be shattered. That it needs to heal. That she can feel it heal when we touch.”

“So a rejection now could be bad?”

“I might not survive it. Not at the moment at least.”

“So whatever you choose, it might be better to wait, at least for you to heal.”

“It would be wiser.”

He nodded pensively. “But all this, it goes beyond that,” he told me.

“How so?” I asked.

“Nothing is ever so simple, son. You might not want to make this political, but it’s going to be. However you approach this. And especially in the present climate. Getting a spirit wolf involved in the game could easily make this far more significant than this pesky little power vacuum. There was a small scrambble for power, sure. But her, she could start something far bigger. She’s a Helen of Troy. What you’re doing could be for your health, or her protection, or your feelings for one another, but in the end, there is a strong possibility that this won’t matter, and how you’re going to deal with this, could not only define this pack, but a lot more, and possibly beyond werewolf society.

Maybe we’ll be lucky and it won’t be too significant. Maybe the times have changed enough for making her not as valuable as she would have once been, or maybe the fact that the world has not seen the like of her for at least two centuries will make this all the more significant.

The thing is, we don’t know. And you gotta make sure whatever you choose, you’re okay with this. All the way. Because once you start to go down that path, there might be no turning back.

Whatever you choose, remember that it won't just affect the two of you."

"I know that," I said irritated. Didn't I just say something like that a few minutes ago? "But I can't just make a decision out of fear of what may or may not happen."

"True."

"Would you dump her if it was you?" I asked him.

"I don't know what I would do?" he said truthfully.

I nodded. "For her, there are probably two main options. One, stay in hiding, the other, ally with power."

He nodded.

"I'm not good with hiding," I said. "And I can't do it. Not with a pack. But I could do the latter."

"You could," he agreed.

"But that would mean to expose her. Take a risk."

"It would."

"I guess that part should be her call," I told him.

"It probably should. But before you offer her options, you should know what you want to do."

I nodded. "Whichever she chooses, I'll do what I can to help her with this."

He nodded.

"I don't know where this would lead us though," I admitted.

"I think I know," my father told me with a smirk.

I looked at him questioningly.

"I saw how you look at her?" he told me.

"Isn't that how most living things with dangly parts look at her?" I told him.

He barked in laugher. "Probably," he admitted. "But it goes beyond that doesn't it?" he asked me.

I shrugged.

"You might not have noticed, but I do have a mate. I know how this part is played, I know how hard it is to resist."

I shrugged again. "We'll see," I said and got up.

My father scoffed at me, but got up too.

"Whatever your decisions, both of you. You have my support. I'll do what I can."

“I want to borrow these,” I said pointing at the books. “I need to understand what I’m getting myself into.”

He nodded and we packed the books in a bag.

“Take good care of that girl,” he told me before I left. “I saw how spooked she was at dinner. I doubt someone in her position has never faced some serious shit.”

I nodded realizing the full implication of what that meant.

— Chapter Twenty-Two —

THINGS I HAD TO UNDERSTAND

— Eveline —

I knocked on my brother's door.

It was a beautiful day, the sun was bright, without a cloud in sight. Darren and I had planned a little romantic day. We would stay in bed all morning, go to a nice little café in town for lunch, and then rent a boat and spent all afternoon on the water. Picnic on the deck with a bottle of champagne, watch the sunset, and come back for a long bath and romantic evening at home.

And of course, we were awakened at four-thirty in the morning because a sewer main broke in town, and he needed to come in to help orchestrate the repairs and deal with the collateral.

It was a bit of a let down because we don't have as many weekends together as we used to. But at the same time, we both liked our jobs and we took moments like these in stride.

So when my brother called me in the morning because he'd been dragged to the office, asking me to spend the day with Elaeya, it was on.

Might as well connect with my future sister-in-law.

I slipped inside before anyone opened the door and went to the living room, where I found her looking at some random books.

"Hi," I said.

"Hello," she told me.

I've had my mother tell me all my teen years that I should stop slouching and have a better posture. That girl's posture would make her proud. It's perfect. It makes me wonder if she's been trained in a religious coven or Buckingham Palace. It's a level of discipline I'll probably never have.

"Did you planned anything today?" I asked her.

"Not really," she admitted.

"Cool. Because apparently we have some money to spend."

She looked at me confused.

"Kaden told me you don't have much of anything and you haven't bought anything yesterday."

"Oh," she said a little uncomfortable.

"So we can shop online, or we can use this day to let loose a bit. There's a pretty big town on Blakemore Territory named Blakeden. It's eclectic, and vibrant, and we can find pretty much everything there. There's a shop I often go where they can get anything you want, custom. Plus, while you're there, you'll be treated like a queen. It's awesome. You'll love it."

"Ehm, I don't need anything extravagant. I can do with very little actually," she said.

"Sure you can," I admitted. "Anyone can. But why do that when you can splurge? Live a little."

I took her hand and led her to the entry hall.

She was definitely not convinced.

I get that money can be intimidating sometimes, but once she starts, she'll get the hang of it.

We put our shoes on and walked out.

I sent a quick text to Kaden, in case he comes back early, so not to look for us.

Don't walk, I'm sending Sam. He texted back right away. What the fuck?

It's like 20 min away. We can walk. I texted back.

Sam is on the way. He'll stay with you all day.

Well, overprotective much?

What has gone into him?

So we walked to the garage instead.

It took Sam maybe fifteen minutes to join us. He was living in the packhouse, so he was always nearby.

I felt a little guilty for cutting on his weekend too. But he was friendly, as usual, and he drove us to town.

"Morea's great," I told Elaeya on our way. "She's been here for ages. She was the one who took care of my mother when she arrived. She's a dryad, so with her type of lifespan, she's seen a lot of eras of fashion, and has a shop at the edge of town. She's the one who dresses nearly all the Lunas around here, and she can get her hand on nearly anything."

Of course, when we came in Morea rolled the metaphorical red carpet for us. She then spent an hour gushing on how pretty Elaeya is. I guess no one can argue with this. Elaeya, on the other hand, looked like someone who was clearly not used to being under the spotlight.

She was twirled around a few times, measured, and Morea began picking clothes for her to try on.

During that time, I took my phone and ordered everything else she could need to be delivered at Kaden's. Hair accessories, some jewelry, makeup, creams, soaps, shampoo, and hair

products—I heard from Kaden she came with nearly nothing, I know he bought her a phone, but just to be safe I ordered a laptop, smartwatch, a good pair of headphones, a tablet—I pretty much raided the Apple Store—I did a massive Sephora order too, and ditto Amazon. I know Morea will get her a few things she has in stock, but now that she has her measurements and will find out what type of clothes fits her best, Elaeya will get massive deliveries from her in the upcoming week too.

Morea had gotten us the best sushi in town for lunch, and she had piled a dozen outfits at least for us to take.

While she was looking at accessories, I picked a few pieces for myself and an absolutely gorgeous purse.

Sam was sitting in a corner scrolling on his phone, looking around once in a while, but mostly being the faithful security guy slash chauffeur.

I never saw Kaden get this protective. I mean, Blakeden is on Blakemore Territory. Sure, there are more than a few visitors here, but everyone considers it neutral territory, and no one would be stupid enough to do something violent, let alone to us, especially us. He never sent a bodyguard with me or my sisters when we went to town. At most, when we were young and would go without our parents, he asked one of the house staff to go with us. But never an excessively muscled, highly trained, mini-giant.

More than a few males gets overprotective when they get their mates, but I never really pictured my brother to be one of those. I mean, for crying out loud, his main bodyguard is a woman. A very deadly woman sure, but he's never been the type to really treat someone differently based on gender.

When he wanted my sisters and me to be safe, he made sure we would have some martial arts and combat training.

Well, maybe that's the plan with Elaeya and Sam is just there until she can fight. But still, it's odd.

Regardless, I am so glad Kaden found his mate. I was developing some serious anxiety regarding his health. I don't know what it changes at the moment, or how quickly it can be reversed—I mean if it can be reversed. God, I hope it can be reversed.

Anyways, this is good news.

Great news even.

Maybe Mom is going to stop looking at me as if I'm about to sprout babies and put her attention on Elaeya instead.

She doesn't look much older than me though, maybe she'll want to wait too. But Kaden and her have a good age gap. I hope it won't mess anything for them. They didn't mark each other. It

doesn't mean it's going wrong though. Darren and I didn't mark one another until weeks after we met. It doesn't sound long before going for such a commitment, but in retrospect, we could have made that move a lot sooner.

Around mid-afternoon, I decided to call it quits. Elaeya had looked like a rabbit in the headlights for most of the day, but now she looked like she had capitulated to her fate.

I think it's the first time I've seen a girl be more exhausted than thrilled at shopping. High-end, all-paid shopping.

So I let Sam pick the bags and put them in the car. And we went back to Kaden's.

— Kaden —

I had managed to return home after lunch. I had expedited everything that I could so I would not be away for too long, but it turned up I came back first. I should have thought about it, with Eva in charge of shopping.

As I had a little bit of spare time, I took some of the books that my father lent me out, and I began studying.

I had called Mrs. Reynolds to be assigned here exclusively. A lot of the staff usually came and went from one building to the next, but I didn't want to expose Elaeya to too many people yet, so I decided to limit my house. Mrs. Reynolds had been doing this for decades, she was discreet and not prone to gossip—and as she was a widow, she was willing to take a room here and take care of all the shifts, which suited me fine.

The girls came back an hour before dinner.

Sam came in, his arms loaded with bags, and brought them to Elaeya's room.

Eva rushed in and kissed me on the cheek.

"Hello, and goodbye. Darren just got his schedule freed, so I'm gonna leave you too lovebird together while I'll try to salvage our romantic day," Eva told me, went to kiss Elaeya on the cheeks too, then left in a rush.

Sam left not long after.

"You look tired," I told Elaeya.

"I do not think I will need to go shopping for the next decade," she told me.

"Don't let Eva hear you." I took her hand and pull her to the living room, to sit comfortably on the sofa. "Come."

We sat next to one another.

She let her head fall on my shoulder and closed her eyes.

“Are you okay?” I asked her.

“Just tired,” she muttered.

I slipped my arm around her shoulders to make us a little more comfortable. She straightens automatically.

“Sorry,” she said.

“Don’t apologize,” I told her. “I don’t mind.”

She turned to look at me, but her eyes stopped on the books on the coffee table. I’ve seen statues more energetic than her at that very moment.

“There are things I had to understand,” I explained.

“When?”

“Yesterday. After dinner. My father figured it up.”

She nodded, her eyes still on the books.

“What will you do now?” she asked me.

“It depends,” I admitted.

— Chapter Twenty-Three —

RESIGNED TO THE END OF EVERYTHING

— Kaden —

“On what?” Elaeya asked me.

I shook my head a couple of times. “Let’s just talk first, then we can make decisions.”

She gave me the barest of nods, but the rest of her body stayed a pure statue. Her back was perfectly ramrod straight, her hands laid on her lap, her head looking ahead, at probably nothing in particular. She looked like someone awaiting her execution, with a sort of empty stoicism, and resigned to the end of everything.

I didn’t like looking at her like that. A part of me wanted to go back to a minute ago when she had her head on my shoulder. But answers were needed.

“Are you a spirit wolf?” I asked her.

She nodded in silence.

“Your father, is he an inja werewolf?”

“What is an inja werewolf?” she asked in a dead voice. She doesn’t know?

“A different breed of werewolf,” I explained. “ I’m a lukán, it’s the most common werewolf breed in the world.”

“I don’t know about breeds,” she said not looking at me.

“Different abilities, specialties, affinities, weaknesses,” I said. “Your mother is a hybrid?”

“Yes.”

“Her father is a spirit wolf?”

“Yes.”

“What about her mother?”

She hesitated. “Witch.”

I nodded. “There are a lot of different stories about spirit wolves.”

“I am sure.”

“I know they’ve been hunted, killed to extinction, or close to it. The females were hunted the worst. That they’ve been more than a few horrible things done to them. But it’s worse with hybrids.”

She gave me the slightest of nods.

“Is that what you meant when you told your parents you had to come unless you might die?” I asked her.

“I do not know.”

I felt like a headsman torturing her. It made me feel like crap. She was in my home, on my land, at my complete mercy, and we were both acutely aware of those facts right now.

“So the first priority is to be your safety,” I said. She finally looked at me. “There are two main ways that I know to do it on the scale required. The first is mostly what you and your family did. Hiding, moving around, lying low, using stealth, and the fact that most of the world thinks you don’t exist to your advantage.” She kept looking at me, but said nothing. “The other is to fort-up. Ally with power, have a good defense, plan for possible offensfes. I don’t know if you understand the full scope of those two options. The former can’t be done with a lot of people, the more there is involved the trickier it gets. As long as no one knows, it can be manageable, but the moment the word gets out, you gotta run and disappear and fast. It also means that I can’t do that with you. I have a pack, people, responsibilities. I can give you all the help that you want, but I can’t be by your side while you do this. But if things go wrong and you need a place to hide, or help fighting back, I could do that if we’re able to get in contact in time.

The latter plays more to my strength. I have land that is already protected, warriors, weapons. This is a good defensible position, but we also have a lot to go on the offensive if needed. But I’m not well-positioned to keep your identity hidden here.

It’s possible to keep you hidden to some extent, but you gotta understand that this may be a temporary solution. But this could not happen if we date, even less with you as Luna. Which means there would be a strong possibility for this information to get out, sooner rather than later. And the consequences of this could go far beyond your own security. It could be seen as a power play. It could be seen as a political, or strategical, or military decision. Whatever the reason why we choose this, it might not matter in the grand scheme of things. But you could have an army at your back. And you may find that it can deter a lot of poppycock. It might filter threats to only the most dangerous, but any strong enough to challenge us regardless, could be a lot more to handle that we’d like.

In the end, how we do it, could be even more significant than the path we choose.”

I let that sink in.

“We?” she finally asked, her eyes calculating.

“We’re mates, aren’t we supposed to be in it together?” I asked her.

“It would be a lot simpler for you not to get involved.”

“Probably,” I conceded. “But not getting involved has never been my policy. Not if you ask for help. If you say you want to do this on your own, then I will respect it. But if you ask for protection you will have it. The only way I would deny you would be for you to hurt me or mines. You gave me no reason to leave you when in need.”

She shook her head. “You are wrong, I did hurt you. I do not know how, but it does not change the facts.”

I nodded. “Was this your intentions?”

“No, of course not.” I saw sadness pass through her features for a fleeting moment.

I nodded again. “Then for this, I will ask you only one thing.”

She nodded.

“Give me time, let me heal. Once I’m fine if you want to leave then leave. Let’s reject each other and move on. I won’t deny you help later on if you ask for it, but we can build the life we want freely.”

“I will,” she said.

“Good.”

“What do you want?” she asked me.

I thought about it. I haven’t often ask myself that question. I’ve generally built my choice on what is asked of me, on what needs to be done. What did I want?

“I don’t like basing my decision on a bunch of bullies. It’s not the risk regarding you that will change my choices, but it will affect how I will approach this situation. So for your security at the very least, I want you to be truthful towards me, I will need a lot more information to prepare with what might come next.”

She looked at her hands on her lap but nodded.

“I am worth far more to you in a cage than as a Luna,” she admitted.

That was a pretty dark thought.

“Maybe, maybe not,” I said. “Worth is subjective. And I don’t need more money.”

She smiled but there was a faint sadness behind that smile.

“I suppose you do not,” she said and looked back at me. “But worth can be more than simply money.”

“Sure,” I admitted. “But I’m not sure if getting a mate for what she’s worth on the black market, or politically, is really what I want.”

“What do you want?”

I thought again.

“To keep you safe,” I admitted. “To kiss you. I have difficulty thinking of anything else when you’re around.”

“Me too,” she admitted. “And it scares me.”

“How so?”

“Because a kiss will never be just a kiss.”

I closed my eyes for a couple of seconds. “I guess it won’t.”

I had still difficulties wrapping my mind around how everything was so convoluted and strange, how one person had turned my life upside down for more than two decades, and finally finding her only shed a light on how little disturbances that have been compared to what may come.

“What do you want?” I asked her.

She looked at her hands again. “I do not know, I do not know what I shall do.”

“I didn’t ask what should be done, but what you want to do?”

She looked back at me.

“I am not sure I know how to distinguish the two,” she admitted.

I instinctively pressed my hand on her shoulder rubbing her skin with my thumb, my arm still around her shoulders. She leaned into the touch and eventually, she put her head back on my shoulder. I took one of her hands in my other one. She glided her fingers in between mines. It felt natural, like we’ve done this a thousand times already.

“If we’re not to give us a chance, I’m not sure this is a good idea,” I told her.

“It is not. But staying away is hard,” she said.

“It is,” I admitted. “I’m not sure if I can do it,” I confessed.

She closed her eyes.

“I will not,” she said.

“Will not what?” I asked.

She opened her eyes, and I saw that opalescent glint move through her eyes for a split second.

“I will not stay away from you,” she said. “I will not leave.”

Well, that changed everything.

— Chapter Twenty-Four —

IN ABSOLUTE DARKNESS

— Elaeya —

A little voice in a dark corner of my mind kept expecting what was apparently not coming. For Kaden to use me, hurt me. All reason told me this is the most plausible actions to expect. But when he spoke of protecting me, I knew every words to be true. When he said he was not calculating my worth to him in money or political power, I knew those words to be equally true.

When he wrapped his arms around me at night, I knew this to be sincere, genuine, and not withholding any hidden meaning, any secret desires except maybe lust. It was hard to ignore this one completely, especially in the morning. But he never acted untoward, he never rushed me, or pressured me. I knew he wanted this. I wanted this. I never lusted as much as I have since I met him. I have never been plagued with lascivious dreams like I have since he had begun sleeping next to me every night.

My body could barely be controlled, my mind kept straying to places in accord with my body's needs. And my heart was observing the events unfold, unsure of how it felt. My instincts knew. They knew I was here to stay. They knew my fate has taken a path that could lead to far more than I ever thought could await me in my future. My heart wanted to feel, to be in harmony with what I knew, what my body begged for, but it felt in free-fall, out of landmarks, anything to hold on too, it was floating in absolute darkness, not knowing where was up and where was down. But every time our skin touched, all I knew is that I did not want it to end.

I also knew that even if he accepted me for what I am, there would be a price to pay. I simply did not know if I would be the one to pay it, or him, or even his people.

And I had absolutely no idea what my place was to be. What I could or should do. What was expected of me, or if I could ever deliver.

When he got up in the morning, all I wanted was to protest and bury myself further in his warmth, but I got up too and prepared for the day.

He had promised me the night before that he would spend the day with me unless something was on fire.

I didn't want to make him feel guilty for not having always time for me, but I also knew we cannot build anything together without investing some time. And quite frankly, I was a little afraid of when he would have to spend more time working, for I had no idea what to do with myself.

Mrs. Raynolds prepared breakfast for us.

I was not used to having my every need catered too, whereas there was probably a long list of things Kaden never even had to worry about, let alone do.

Before breakfast ended, the first packages were delivered.

“This one is for you,” Kaden told me.

The first had been a contract for him. I didn’t even think there were delivery services on Sundays, but there were, apparently, here.

The box I was holding contained nine purses.

“I did not order this,” I told him. “Morea gave me four already, I just need one.”

“Well, either Morea ordered you more, or Eva did. And don’t women changes purses all the time?”

“Do they?” I asked aghast.

“How do I know? I don’t have purses, I have pockets,” he said chewing on a bite of waffles.

I looked at the eleven other boxes suspiciously.

“I’m pretty sure all the others are for you too,” he told me.

I bit my lips, still looking at them, worried.

“Miss, do you want me to bring them to your room?” Mrs. Raynolds asked me.

I got up. “I can take care of this.”

Kaden grabbed my hand and pulled me back on my chair. Mrs. Raynolds looked a little troubled.

“Let me take care of them,” she told me and piled a few of them in her arms and moved them upstairs.

I looked at Kaden askance.

“You’re insulting her,” he told me.

I blinked.

He sighed. “Her job is to care for this household, but taking tasks from her, you’re telling her you either find her incapable or don’t trust her to do it.”

“No, of course not. I am much younger than she. I am more than capable. And if those are mine, are they not my responsibility?”

“And you are her responsibility,” he told me pointedly. “And she may be older than you, but it doesn’t mean she’s incompetent.”

“Of course not. That is not what I meant. I do not want to insult anyone, but it does not mean that because she works here, that I cannot do anything by myself anymore.”

He put his fork down.

“Elaeya, this is how packs work. Everyone plays their part and takes pride in it. We are a community, a family and benefit from that collaboration. I spend a lot of my time and energy making sure all of my people are safe, and well cared for. Blakemore and all its packs offer a great quality of life. We don’t have a single member that qualifies as below the national poverty line. We have no homelessness. Universal healthcare, that covers psychological care and even addictions. The crime rate is laughably low, and there have been no attacks on Blakemore proper in more than a century. Do you know how few packs can brag of that much? Not many. And in exchange for this, I don’t have to worry about cooking, or vacuuming, or putting boxes away. I can focus on more important things than others like Mrs. Raynolds will reap the benefits of, and she, like many like her, can feel pride in being part of that success.”

I swallowed. “But that is you. I have done nothing. I am just here being given things and doing nothing for it.”

“Firstly, you are my guess, and for such should be treated accordingly. And secondly, you could potentially become their Luna. If they can’t even treat someone like you with deference, I won’t have to scold anyone, because any aware of this would be more than appalled enough. Such actions mean more than just willingness or not to do this work. It reflects on one’s own respect towards this pack.”

I pursed my lips. I did not know how to respond to this, but it did not make it any easier to understand.

“Do you feel bad for the barista when you order a coffee in a coffee shop?” he asked me.

“No,” I said.

“No, because she’s paid for the work, and it’s her freaking job to do so. Mrs. Raynolds is paid for this, handsomely so. This is her job. This is what is expected of her and that she’s agreed for.”

“I understand.” I said meekly.

I was not hungry anymore so I took my plate and got up.

“Elaeya,” Kaden told me.

I put the plate down instantly and sat back down with my hands on my lap.

He sighed.

I am clearly not cut out for this.

“I’m not scolding you,” he told me, his voice was gentler.

I looked up at him.

“I know there are a lot of adjustments. You’ll get the hang of it in no time,” he said.

I doubt it.

“I don’t want you to feel like crap,” he said. “I know you never did things this way, I just want you to understand.”

“But wouldn’t this,” I pointed at my plate, “Make things just a little easier on her?”

“That’s not what is important here. If her job is too much, she’ll say it and I’ll hire more staff.”

His arguments made sense in a way, but it also felt as if he was talking in an alien language.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” he said angrily as his phone rang. He picked it up and moved out of the room to take the call. I just looked at the space he left absolutely unsure of how I felt about everything.

“Miss?” asked Mrs. Raynolds as she came back in the room.

“Yes,” I said twisting a little to look at her, straightening up.

“Could I talk to you a little?”

“Of course,” I replied.

She pointed at the chair next to mine, and I moved my hand allowing her to sit.

“I don’t know of your circumstances, but I understand that you are not from here. I can assure you nothing unsavory is happening here.”

“I know,” I said in a sigh. “I am a stray,” I admitted. “I don’t know how packs operate, everything is alien to me. I know what he said makes sense. It simply feels jarring to me, as if I am using people and resources in ways that I do not deserve or earn,” I confessed.

She nodded. “I understand. But it doesn’t mean that because you have not done work at this very moment to make you feel like you’ve earned to be treated this way, that it doesn’t mean you won’t in the future.”

I probably looked unconvinced.

“He’s right when he said we take pride in our work. There can be a great sense of accomplishment in knowing that something I do can make a difference to those around me. Washing linens might not be as glorious as signing a peace treaty with a neighboring pack, but I take joy in what little I can do and the impact, no matter how limited it may be. And I am being paid very well. You don’t have to feel guilty about this. He may look like a big brute, but he has never treated me or any of my colleagues with disrespect.”

I nodded and looked apprehensively at the remaining boxes on the table.

“Those were given to you out of generosity, don’t feel bad about it,” she reassured me.

“I have never had more than ten pieces of clothing at once. I do not even know what to do with all of these.”

“How about you let me open and organize all of these, and I can help you with anything you may need.”

I nodded reluctantly.

She smiled at me, picked a few more boxes, and moved them upstairs.

Kaden spent a few hours in his office. An hour after breakfast Mrs. Raynolds came in the drawing-room and deposited three books on the coffee table, inclined her head, and left to return a few minutes later with tea.

One book was a study in werewolf society, one was a history of the region and more specifically Blakewoods and the Devon family line, and the last one was the detailed duties of a Luna.

Kaden joined me eventually. Later in the afternoon, we moved to the living room where we watched a couple of movies. The last time I did something like this, I was in high school and I had been at that school for a couple of months, I had gone to a friend’s house and I had watched movies all weekend with her and her brother. And while she had been in the kitchen getting snacks, her brother had stolen my first kiss.

— Chapter Twenty-Five —

PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

— Elaeya —

I woke up slowly as a wonderful feeling was enveloping me, but my eyes popped open suddenly as a surge of energy went from my neck, right down my spine, and ended between my legs. My body arched instinctively pressing against his, and I moaned uncontrollably.

I blinked a few times, confused over what had just happened.

Kaden was giving me slow delicate kisses on my neck. It felt sensitive and I unconsciously put my fingers up there.

“Sorry, I woke you,” he said. He did not sound sorry at all.

“What have you done?” I asked perplexed.

“I might have bit you a little,” he admitted.

I turned sharply around.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “I didn’t mark you.”

“Marked?” I asked.

“You know what marking means, right?”

I shook my head.

His eyes widened a little.

“Do you know about forging a mate bond?”

I shook my head again.

He looked taken aback.

“It is something I should know doesn’t it?” I said.

“Usually people know before they meet their mates,” he admitted.

I shifted my body so that I laid on my back, to better look at him.

“What is forging a mate’s bond and how does it work?”

He put his head on his hand, his elbow against the mattress.

“Forging the bond means solidifying it. Ehm, like making it stronger.”

I nodded.

"It's done in three steps, marking, mating, and claiming. There is no specific order and they can be done all at once or over a span of time."

He scratched at his shin.

"Not all breeds of werewolves go about it the same way, and even within a breed, there are a few variants over different cultures in the world. For example, not every wolf marks the same spots, but the most common ones are on the neck. It's the sensitive spots here and here," he said putting his finger on the corner of my neck on either side.

I touched. "It's not sensitive."

He smiled. "Not to your own touch. Humans don't have anything particularly sensitive there. It comes from your wolf nature.

Natural wolves have this habit while mating to have the male bite the female's neck to make her more docile. It's not so much a human thing, but the wolf part of our nature does respond to a lot of natural wolf behaviours. So your neck can get really sensitive to being bitten."

"All werewolves?" I asked.

"Females," he corrected me.

"And a mark is made there?"

"A bite deep enough to penetrate the skin, then you cut your tongue on your canine and lick the wound to insert the blood in. It's like a tattoo but with blood instead of ink."

"Isn't it painful?"

"When the fangs pierce through, yes, but when the blood gets in, it's pretty much the opposite. Which is why a lot of people tend to do this during sex, or at the very least in private."

"Just the females are marked?"

"No, and it depends. There are some packs who marks just she-wolves, it was more common a few centuries back though, and I heard of some packs in the north of Canada, Alaska, and Mongolia where it's the female only who marks. But nowadays it's pretty common to mark each other. Around here, the left is the usual spot," he said touching the spot on my left side.

"But it's only pleasurable to female?"

"The biting, without going too deep, usually works only on females, but marking is different. And once the mark is there, it becomes a lot more sensitive. But not as much for males," he admitted. "On the other hand, forging a bond allows to feel, to some extent, what the other feels, so it kinda compensates."

"So that is marking."

He nodded.

"Then?"

"Mating. Which is pretty straight-forward really."

"So intimacy between us would automatically change the nature of our bond?"

"Yes."

"Is there something in particular that triggers it?"

"There are a few different schools of thought on the matter. Some say it has to include penetration, yet some lesbian couples can do it without it. So no one knows exactly if there is a single part of the act that does it, or if it's a more global thing."

I nodded.

"Claiming is fairly straight-forward too. The mates claim each other with a few words and that's that."

"Like an oath?"

"Pretty much."

"Blood, sex, and oaths?"

He nodded.

"That sounds really like a magical ritual," I said.

"Sex is used in magic?"

"There is a whole area of magic *called* sex magic."

"And why was I not informed of this?" he half-joked thoughtfully.

I smiled. "A lot of things are highly magical. Emotions, and especially high concentration of emotions are magical. It is how crowds of people who share something can lead to magical phenomenons like the Miracle of Fátima. Intimacy is something that requires a great level of vulnerability, and it goes beyond that when emotions are involved. Whenever someone touches another, it leaves a mark, a kiss, a hug, and the stronger the emotions behind this the deeper the connection, so making love between two lovers goes so deep that there is an actual exchange. Pieces of one another's soul rip and connect to the other's. I wouldn't be surprised that the level of intimacy and emotions affect the level of the forging of that bond, when it comes to mating. Any magic that involves souls is among the most potent. Combined with a blood exchange ritual and oaths. I believe this should make for a relatively strong and difficult to break attachment. Even without the bond to support it as a foundation."

He nodded. "It's possible to build a bond artificially, but it doesn't hold the road without forging it. It's not considered as strong as one made between natural mates."

“Can the forged bond be broken?”

“It’s possible, but ridiculously hard to do, and it doesn’t always work. It’s easier to break it up before forging it.”

He moved his fingers up and down the line of my neck.

“You want to mark me?”

His eyes snapped to mine.

“I can’t say the thought hasn’t crossed my mind.”

I looked back in his eyes, looking for an answer that did not come.

“I’m not sure I am ready to forge the bond,” I finally said.

He nodded. “Marks are a bit like territorial markings. A way to say to others someone’s taken.”

“Like wedding rings?”

“I guess. A lot of people see claiming like a marriage.”

He kept moving his finger delicately on my skin, I had to make a conscious effort not to close my eyes and indulge in a frisson.

“There is a more temporary version of marking that people do when dating.”

“How?” I asked.

“I could show you,” he said looking into my eyes.

I was not sure there was much reasoning in that answer, but I nodded.

He put his arm around my waist and swung me back on my side, my back pressed to his front. He moved my hair away from my neck and planted a few kisses on my skin.

He alternated between lips and tongue, but when his teeth grazed my hide, my legs tighten subconsciously. He kept his rhythm, and every time his teeth tighten a little more, I pressed myself harder against him instinctively. But the last time he bit me he pressed his lips against my skin, sucking on it. I moaned.

One of his hands snaked on my lower belly, waiting for me to push him away, but I clawed at his arms, my breathing hectic, and his fingers crept between my legs. The fabric between our skin could have been inexistent as I felt every movement in technicolour. His other hands found my breast and I could feel his erection behind my back.

I moved in uncontrollable cadence that he followed.

His teeth tighten and I exploded.

It took me a few seconds to be able to see my surroundings again and Kaden had resumed to gently kissing my neck, the skin sensitive, my legs vices around his hand.

When I looked at him, my breathing barely under-control, he had a pleased smile plastered on his face. I touched the mark. The skin felt a little raw, but it had not been pierced.

I raised my head to go and check in a mirror, but he held me down.

He grabbed his phone and showed me the biggest and darkest hickey I had ever seen.

“A hickey?” I asked somewhat bemused.

“It’ll disappear in a few days, a week tops. We’ll have to do this again before then.” He wiggled his eyebrows. I couldn’t stop myself, I laughed.

“Does it mean I have to give you one now?”

He swung me in his arm, putting me atop him.

“Be my guest,” he told me, smiling.

“I have never done this.”

“I can guide you.”

Emboldened, I pressed my lips on his neck in a similar fashion he did mine. He did guide me. The effect it had on him was a little anticlimactic. He had warned me it did not affect men as it did women, but a part of me wanted to see him lose control just like I did. For which, I realized, moving my hips was far more efficient than anything I did to his neck.

His hands snapped to my hips and soon controlled my movements as he pleased himself.

It did not take long for him to find his release.

When I raised my head to look at my handy work, I was rather disappointed.

“I do not think it will last more than a day.” The mark had barely any colour to it.

He smiled at me, put his arm around me, and swung us around so my back was against the mattress, himself above me.

“We can do this more often,” he said. “Practice makes perfect.”

That had me grinning.

We kissed, deeply.

His phone alarm beeped and his right hand dug around looking for it while not breaking the kiss.

“Fuck!” he said springing up, looking at the time on his cellphone.

“Are you late for something?” I asked taken aback by the sudden change in mood.

“Video conference in the office,” he said.

He took one quick sniff at his shirt and declared, “Shower, I can’t go to the office smelling of lust.”

He ran to his room and took a quick shower and dressed before I even had the time to get inside a shower myself.

He came back into my room and gave me a peck.

“Later,” he said.

“What about breakfast?” I asked after him.

“No time, I’ll get a bigger lunch,” he said going down the stairs.

“That is not healthy,” I said after him, by my door.

“I’ll survive,” I heard from the floor below before he closed the front door.

— Chapter Twenty-Six —

WOULDN'T THAT BE INAPPROPRIATE?

— Elaeya —

Kaden was right about the smell. I made sure to wash thoroughly before I went down for breakfast.

Of course, omelets were already prepared and served when I walked into the kitchen.

I was used to being alone, do things on my own, in silence, but this morning, the silence was weighing on me, and I sat at the counter instead while Mrs. Raynolds took care of washing the pan.

"Were the books I lend you yesterday useful?" she asked me after a minute.

"Yes, very much, thank you. I will continue to study them," I replied.

"I'm glad to hear this, Miss. If you ever want more, just tell me, I can probably find many more."

"That would be lovely." I took a few more bites, it was delicious. "Does he do this very often? To skip meals?"

"Alpha Devon?"

"Yes."

"He is a very busy man."

I pursed my lips but said nothing.

Mrs. Raynolds looked at me from above her shoulder. She put the pan down and turned around to face me.

"How about I prepare something and you can bring it to him?" she suggested.

"Oh, no, no, no. I was not saying this to insert myself in his affairs." I shook my left hand in refusal and took another bite.

"You are worried about him, and rightfully so. Let's do something about it," she said with a sunny smile. She looked like a really kind woman.

"It is not my place."

"It's very your place, or you would not have that mark on your neck."

I pawed at it subconsciously.

I shook my head. "He can take care of himself, it is not my place to interfere."

"He takes care of you, so I think you can take care of him too," she told me wisely.

"Wouldn't that be inappropriate of me?"

"Given your position, I think it would be highly appropriate," she went to the refrigerator. "How about I prepare something easy for him to eat while working, and you can bring it to him?"

I nearly choked on my food, and swallowed carefully.

"It is not my place to go there. Maybe I should just send someone to cater it to him," I suggested.

"I don't think it would have the same effect," she told me, taking a few things out and laying them on the counter. "I think the person that does the delivery is as important as the meal itself."

"I don't think we are like that yet." It sounded awfully domestic, and I wasn't sure how I felt about it.

"That is not what I heard this morning," she said under her breath as she kept her eyes on her task.

I felt myself blush furiously.

"And if this is not what the two of you are yet, wouldn't it mean that you have to make an effort to reach that goal?" she asked sagely.

"That is a sensible train of thought," I admitted absentmindedly.

She smiled at me.

"Wouldn't it be strange for me to go in there?" I asked her, putting my fork down.

"You will have to do it eventually," she told me.

I nodded distractedly.

I closed my eyes and concentrated, but I got nothing.

I nodded again. "Do you need help?"

She smiled at me again, and an echo from yesterday's conversation flashed through my eyes. She saw it too, and shook her head. "I'm nearly done. You can finish your breakfast and get ready."

* * * * *

I stood by the packhouse with a small bag in my hand. Mrs. Raynolds made breakfast burritos and I prepared coffee. I was fairly sure he could easily get coffee at his office, but I felt the need for a thermos.

She gave me indications on how to reach his office, and I tried really hard not to get awkwardly lost. The house was enormous.

I had tied my hair in a low braided bun not to attract more attention than necessary with my hair. When I left, two more deliveries of boxes were being taken to my room. I didn't even dare verify what was in them. Would there be more? Mrs. Raynolds was probably organizing their content by now.

I walked through the hall and down a long wide corridor. I crossed a few people who looked curiously at me, I ignore them and tried to look as if I knew exactly where I was going. I took a turn and headed toward the office wing.

The architecture changed from Victorian to something more Tudor-esque, intersected with highly modern additions of glass, stainless steel, and polished white glossy finishes.

"Excuse me, Miss," someone interrupted me.

I turned around.

"I don't know you. How did you enter this building? This is not for visitors," he told me.

He was sitting behind a desk, another man dressed exactly like him, in a black suit and a white dress shirt, joined him.

Maybe I should just give him the package to get it to Kaden.

"Oh, what a surprise," said a female voice that I recognized.

I turned around and saw Eva. She had traded her jeans and shirt for a dark-purple button-down and high-waisted pencil skirt. She looked quite elegant and professional.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, coming to me and giving me kisses on both cheeks.

"Do you know her Gamma Devon?" asked the man at Eva.

"Obviously," she gestured at what had just happened, I supposed she questioned his deduction abilities. She turned to me.

"I am just delivering something," I said.

She looked down at my package, smelled the air, and smiled broadly at me.

"I'm sorry Gamma, Miss, but you are not in our files, you can't go any further."

"Then put her on file," ordered Eva.

The man looked at his colleague briefly, but complied.

He took a camera and snapped a picture of me, which made me highly uncomfortable. I always made sure to never leave any photographic evidences behind.

“Name?” he asked me.

“Elaeya,” I replied.

“Full name,” he corrected.

“Elaeya Nari Ishaï Alden,” I complied.

He blinked. He probably had no idea how to write it.

Eva made an exasperated face, took the form from him and gave it to me, leaned over his desk to grab a pen and gave it to me too.

“That’s not how it’s done,” he told Eva. She scoffed.

I wrote my name in full and showed it to him.

He took the form from me and continued.

“Age?”

“Twenty-two.”

“Place of birth?”

“Unknown.”

He looked at me. Eva signed for him to continue.

“Citizenship?”

“None.”

“Social security number?”

“None.”

“Last place of residence?”

“None.”

He raised his head once more. “Now Miss…”

“She really has none,” confirmed Eva. She took the form from him again. He looked like he wanted to argue with her, but let her do it.

“We have security protocols for a reason,” the second man told Eva.

“Sure,” she said. “Isn’t there a vouching box somewhere?”

“Here,” said the first man pointing to the place on the form. She signed her name, and filled another box. Then gave the sheet back.

“Come,” she told me. “I’ll show you around.”

“She needs to be verified. And it will take a long while with so little information.”

“Look at the box that reads relation to the pack,” Eva told him.

He looked down, I looked too.

Future Blakemore’s Luna

The man blinked at me with his eyes wide.

Eva took my hand and led me further in the building.

“Wait,” said the second man. The first slapped him in the chest and showed him the form. He looked annoyed at his colleague but looked down. His eyes bulged out and he looked slowly up at me.

“I can trust you to be discreet, gentlemen?” Eva asked them.

“Yes Gamma Devon,” they both replied and we left and moved up a flight of stairs.

Then another.

And another.

We stopped on the fifth floor. I could see the woods through the small windows deeply recessed in the thick reinforced walls of the fortress that made the office wing.

There was a desk near the stairs where two men similarly dressed to the ones below, sat. One of them jumped to his feet and inclined his head. It was Stellan. The other straightens in his chair.

“Hey, there Eva,” he said.

Stellan kicked at his legs for him to get up, but the man looked back at him confused.

“Hey guys,” said Eva as we passed them.

We walked pass a few offices, until we reached a reception desk with a dark skin man sitting there.

“Hey Mark,” Eva told him. “You can go ahead,” she told me, pointing at the wooded medieval door with long black hinges.

“You can’t,” Mark told me. “The Alpha is having an important call.”

“You can’t,” Eva told him. “She can.”

He looked as confused as I was.

“No one can block her,” she explained to him. “She outranks us all.” She looked at me. “Well… It’s a work in progress.”

“Now I’m really confused,” Mark said.

Eva leaned over his desk and in a conspiratorial way muttered, “I don’t know if we can let this information go around yet, but she’s kinda your future Luna,” she said.

I squirmed. If things continued this way, everyone will assume I am Luna before either Kaden or I make any conscious choices regarding this.

“Which pack?” he muttered, clearly enjoying this.

“Blakemore,” she replied.

His eyes widened as he looked at me.

“Well, I’ll say this,” he finally commented. “Your brother has taste.”

I looked down nervously.

“Go on ahead,” said Eva again.

Mark waved his hand communicating the same thing. Apparently, there were no more objections.

I inclined my head timidly and went to his office door, with the hope it would be less embarrassing with Kaden, but I doubted it.

I knocked twice and opened the door.

The office was large, the walls all made of thick stones. There was a large square midnight blue rug that covered most of the space. There was a large wooden desk before which were two leather chairs. There was a sofa further back and large bookcases covering most of the walls.

Kaden’s head whipped up annoyed, but his expression changed completely when he saw me. He had an earpiece, and I could hear someone talk on the other end, so I stayed quiet.

Kaden gestured at one of the chairs before his desk, I nodded nervously and went to sit.

“I don’t see how we can move this forward otherwise,” he told his interlocutor.

“I know, how about we meet up, have a long chat, brainstorm some?” asked the male voice on the phone. It sounded young and foreign. Latin? French maybe?

“I really can’t leave at the moment,” said Kaden, looking at me.

“How about I come?” the man suggested. “You’re always helping out, and I haven’t seen your pack in what twelve years?”

“More or less. And yes, it would work much better for me. We can go more into detail about the contracts, and how we approach this. And while you’re at it, I have the Brotherhood on my ass, and they’re not happy with me, it could help to have a neutral party present.”

“Sure. I don’t want to break it to you man, but I don’t think they ever really liked you.”

“Oh, I know they never liked me. I’m just saying, they’re liking me even less now,” said Kaden.

“Ouch, if this continues it will turn hostile.”

“That’s what I’m worried about. I don’t want hostilities right now.”

“Okay, give me a few days, maybe a week. I’ll check my schedule with Laeticia and confirm with you.”

“Deal,” said Kaden.

“Okay, I’ll call you later,” the man said.

Kaden grunted in affirmation and hung up. He looked at me happily.

“Is this breakfast that I smell?”

— Chapter Twenty-Seven —

LINE OF FIRE

— Elaeya —

“Mrs. Raynolds made something for you,” I said.

He extended his hand and I gave him the bag. Before he had time to open it, his earpiece beeped.

“Yes,” he answered.

It brought our short conversation to a premature stop, and I nodded to him and rose.

Outside, Mark was at his desk and nodded to me, while on the phone himself. There were a few desks back where Eva was, sitting at one, typing furiously on her computer.

A black-haired young woman came towards me with a few files in her hands and stopped in her track a few feet from me. I recognised her from the dinner at Kaden’s parents. Her name is Nadine. Another of his sisters.

“Oh, hey,” she said.

“Hello,” I replied.

She put the files on Mark’s desk. “For Eva,” she muttered to not bother him during his call. He nodded at her and continued his conversation.

“You came to see Kade?” she asked me. I saw her eyes move to my neck and she grinned sunnily at me.

“I just came to give him something. He is busy.”

“He’s always busy. Maybe you’ll help loosen him up a bit.”

I shrugged in non-commitment.

Behind me, the office door flew open and Kaden walked out.

“I’m going to Blakeden for a while. I don’t know when I’ll be back. Transfer everything to Brandon,” he told Mark, who got on his feet and nodded, then inclined his head, and Kaden walked by.

“Hey,” he told Nadine and wrapped an arm around my waist. “I’m borrowing her for a second.” And he dragged me further down the corridor.

“Sure,” she said behind our back.

“You want to see Blakeden?” he asked me.

“Sure,” I replied. “Won’t I be in the way?”

“Nah, I might not have the time to give you a full tour though.”

“It is fine.”

He nodded. He was holding the bag I had brought him in his other hand.

A few heads were turning our way as we passed by, and he slipped his arm off my waist. Most people inclined their heads politely to him, he did no such thing. I had no idea what the protocol was for me to do. I did not read any of this in the books, at least not yet.

Back outside, Sam was by the car, near the door. He opened the door closest to us, nodded at me with a smile, and went around to open the door on the other side.

Kaden pushed his hand against my back, guiding me to the closest door, and went around the car to sit on the other side.

Of all the peoples I crossed paths with so far, other than Kaden, Sam was probably the one I was most comfortable with.

We got in the car and moved towards Blakeden.

Kaden took one of the breakfast burritos out, took a bite, and swallow a third of it in one go. He then pulled the coffee thermos cup from the bag, and took a long pull appreciatively.

I let him eat while he had a bit of time, and looked as the landscape morph from manicured woodlands to more developed area, until we reached the old cobblestone streets of Blakeden. I know now than this town has existed for centuries, in one form or another. Most of the buildings were two or three stories high and packed tightly together. There were a lot of small shops of all kinds at street level, and the diversity of them was staggering. It went from normal fresh produce stands to occult shops. People did not seem to try very hard at hiding their preternatural nature either. I could smell humans here, but their smell was not as predominant as it is in most cities. On the contrary, I suspected humans to be a minority. Many probably even knew of the supernatural world, as evident by what little concealment seems to be the norm around here.

The streets were tight and the expensive black sedan had to be driven slowly with care through some of them.

Kaden went through the three burritos in record time.

“Do you always eat this quickly?” I asked him.

He shrugged. “Sometimes.”

Sam parked the car in between two big buildings, one with an old stone facade, and the other with a pale wood one.

“You don’t have to come in with me,” Kaden told me. “If you don’t want to precipitate introductions.”

“It’s already happening,” I said looking at the people walking on the sidewalk.

“What is happening?” he asked me.

“Eva introduced me as the future Luna of Blakemore twice today,”

He sighed. “I’ll talk to her.”

“Some people saw us walk together, I had my picture taken today. I will probably not be able to keep my identity secret for very long.”

He said nothing, I kept looking at the passerby. This town seemed like a very interesting place.

“It is only a matter of time until someone other than your father recognise what I am.”

“I’m finding you a bodyguard today,” he told me. “I can reorganize security fairly rapidly.”

I nodded. The sun was way high in the sky, it looked like this will be one of the last warm days of summer. The breeze had this northbound smell to it. Tonight will be a cold night.

“Are you angry?” he asked me.

I turned to look at him and shook my head. “I don’t think I’m ready, but I have to be. If I wait I will never be ready and it will happen regardless.”

“If you want to, I can ask Sam to get you home whilst I do this.”

I shook my head again. “This won’t be as long as you anticipated, there will be three interruptions taking more of your time, but it will be done before lunch, and you will offer to take me somewhere in town to eat.”

He blinked. “I guess I will,” he said a little astounded.

I smiled gently at him. “You should go now, I will look around and wait for you,” I said gesturing at the little shops around us.

“Sam,” Kaden said. He was still sitting at the front, silent. “You stay with her, any sign of troubles you get her in the car, and get her back to my place.”

“Yes, sir,” Sam replied seriously.

Kaden nodded at no one in particular and left the car. He walked maybe ten feet, his black suit a contrast to the light building finishes, he opened a side-door and disappeared inside.

I did not move, Sam waited.

"You want to ask me something," I finally told him.

He looked at me in the retrovisor.

"I know when to shut up and keep to myself, Miss. I'm not gonna butt in your business."

I nodded. "But you want to ask."

He chewed on his tongue.

"Kaden trust you deeply."

"Maybe," he replied.

I gave him a look.

He smiled. "How do you know that I want to ask you something?"

"The same way I knew what awaits Kaden this morning," I told him.

"Do you always know what's going to happen?"

I shook my head. "I do not always control what I know. I can try more actively to learn about something, but what I will learn and when, is not truly under my control."

"The boss is worried about your security. Is there a reason to be particularly worried?"

I looked in his eyes in the mirror for an instant. "Possibly."

"Something I should be aware of?"

"If we ever are under attack, do not stay in my line of fire."

He blinked.

I bent my head as I opened the door, hiding a smirk.

I heard him leave the car a few beats after me.

I supposed my appearance did not stand out here as much as it ever did anywhere else.

I moved to the closest shop.

"Hey, there pretty lady," said the shopkeeper. "I got the best and freshest fruits in town. And I have everything form jackfruits from Bangladesh, Haitian mangos, Peruvian pacay, persimmons, pomelo, plantain, mangosteen…" he pointed to various exotic fruits.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I'm just looking, I don't have money on me."

Sam dug in his wallet and wiped out a plastic card.

"Here's a gentleman," said the shopkeeper.

"I cannot take your money," I told Sam.

“It’s not mine,” he told me. “It’s the boss’s.”

He kept his arm extended until I took the card. The shopkeeper looked expectantly at me, so I politely bought two persimmons from him.

I do not remember ever walking around and buying whatever I pleased.

I bit into a persimmon and it was perfect. I offered the other to Sam which he took.

We did not walk very far but we checked a few places, after a couple of blocks I went to the other side of the street and slowly walked my way back to the car. Kaden walked out as we approached.

“We need to go to Simon’s,” he told Sam.

“Interference number one?” Sam asked.

“Apparently.”

We piled back in the car and moved to the next place.

We parked in a residential area. I walked a little around, looking at the yards, the flower-beds, the colourful front doors.

There was a truck by the side of the road where people unloaded furniture, an elderly woman, guiding three men where to put things. One man was inside the house carrying heavy boxes in, one was inside the truck and a young man, barely out of his teen was on the street holding the weight of a heavy commode. As he lowered it, it slipped and Sam rushed and caught it before it crushed his leg.

“I told you to use your legs, not your back,” said the man in the truck.

“It’s okay, I got this,” said Sam.

He helped lower a few other heavy pieces, so I went to make myself useful and piled boxes on the cart they had, to move them.

The oldest of the three came out of the house, took one look at Sam, and said, “Do you want a job?”

“Sorry Sir, but I already have one.”

“You’re not from around here,” he told me.

“No,” I admitted.

“Are you a new member?” asked the man in the truck.

“Not yet.”

The youngest kept looking at me, saying nothing.

“What pack are you applying for?” he said jumping off the truck next to us.

“Blakemore I suppose.”

“No one applies to Blakemore, you’re wasting your time,” said the oldest.

“She isn’t,” said Sam.

The grey-haired man whiffed the air furrowing his eyebrows. “Hybrid?”

“What type?” asked the other. The youngest still looked at me silently, his mouth slightly open.

“I am sorry to have bothered you, we have to leave. I wish you a good day,” I told them, so Sam joined me ready to leave.

“You’re leaving to avoid answering the question,” said the old man cleverly. “Are you even applying to Blakemore, or is this some sort of con? We often get riff-raff around town. Things that think they are better than they are.”

“Careful here,” said Sam walking towards the man, his eyes intent.

“We don’t really care about that nonsense hybrid thing,” he said.

Sam started growling.

The old lady was out looking at the situation with wide eyes. Sam was more than a head taller than all of the men and his arms were probably as wide as my waist.

This is the exact moment when Kaden got out of the building and walked on the situation his eyes nothing but slits.

The other man that had been talking to me noticed Kaden and inclined his head, slapping the youngest on the chest for him to do the same.

“What is going on here?” asked Kaden in a menacing tone.

The others noticed their Alpha and the older lady breathed in through her teeth.

“Nothing, we are just leaving,” I told him.

While at the same time Sam said, “Someone has an issue with hybrids.”

Kaden growled. Sam’s growl had been menacing, but Kaden’s… I could smell that the youngest of the three had a small bladder leakage. Everyone was silent, their eyes wide and shying away from his gaze.

“This is not what this pack stands for,” he said, his voice deep and dark.

“I’m… I’m just saying that if she’s not saying what she is, then maybe she’s a problem.” The old man dared say, but he did not dare look at Kaden’s face.

“She said what she is, just not to you. You’re not the one in charge, that is none of your business. She’s under my aegis, here under a personal invitation, and you insulted her.”

Those words sounded like he’s just nailed their collective coffin shut.

“I’m sorry A … A … Alpha.”

“There will be consequences for this.” He took my hand and dragged me to the car, Sam in tow.

“Nothing is going on?” Kaden said turning to me once we were all in the car.

“I did not want to create a scene,” I explained.

“Do you remember that discussion about respect and position we had?” he said between clenched teeth.

Only this time I crossed my arms. “Yes, but you cannot be using this or what just happen to scold me like a child.”

His expression loosens.

“Do not go on blaming this on me,” I told him.

“I’m not,” he reversed course. “I’m just saying, you can’t say nothing is happening when something his clearly happening.”

“I am not going to walk around bullying people into being nice to me.”

“Of course not, but this is not something that should be an issue.”

“If you see no problem with hybrids, it does not mean all those under you think the same thing. You cannot go around controlling people’s thoughts. And even among those who do not care about hybrids, do you think they will think the same when they hear your mate is one? Or when they learn of what I am, do you think they will see no significance in that? If you start getting angry at all who has an issue with me, you are going to spend a whole lot of your life angry,” I told him.

Sam parked the car as we reached the third destination.

“If I bring you nothing but anger, then maybe this is not a good idea after all.”

“What?” he asked confused.

“You should go, you are awaited.”

“They can wait some more, we’re talking,” he told me.

“I am not going anywhere,” I said.

He bit his lip.

A man walked out of the building and walked to the car urgently.

Kaden sighed. “We are not done talking.”

“We are not,” I agreed placidly, and he walked out to deal with the matters at hand.

“If I may, Miss?” asked Sam.

I nodded and sighed.

“His point is valid. People can’t go around insulting you.”

The windows were open, Kaden was still outdoors, and not far enough not to be listening. That might have been even why Sam was continuing the conversation.

I nodded. “But this man knew nothing of my status, or possible status thereof. And I acted suspiciously in front of them all. He was clever enough to notice that I was hiding this information. Wouldn’t this be rational of someone protective of their pack, family, territory?” I asked. “I am not without faults, and if blaming others for my own failures is what being in power within a pack is, then I do not want this.

He was rude, yes, but I am not blameless, and the best courses of actions should have been either, to clear the air with the necessary information, or accept defeat and move away from conflict. I chose the latter because I was unwilling to do what was necessary for the former. To simply be angry and call for punishment is wrong,” I said.

I saw Kaden give a brief glance at the car. He heard this.

“Now that this has been cleared, we can move away from this debacle and finish this,” I dropped my head back, and watched a few cloud pass by from the back window.

“Well, if your timeline is correct, we should deal with the last task soon, because it’s about lunchtime,” Sam said looking at his watch.

— Chapter Twenty-Eight —

EVERYTHING IN THE RIGHT PLACE

— Kaden —

It took me mostly an hour to wrap everything up, and we did go to a restaurant in town. I got us a private room, and we ate mostly in silence.

“You are trying to find a solution for something,” said Elaeya.

I looked up at her.

“Maybe,” I said. I took another bite.

“What is it about?”

I did not want to trigger another argument. But then I remembered how hiding things from her is pretty pointless.

“Earlier,” I said.

“Regarding the comments about hybrids?” she asked. I couldn’t read her expression. Once I had gotten back inside the car, she had been her normal self, which does not tell me much because she always looks so cryptic, to begin with. I couldn’t tell if she was angry at me, or just indifferent about the whole thing.

“I said there would be consequences, I can’t go back on my words. It’s not good to do in my position,” I told her.

“So you want to punish him?” she asked. Again, I had no idea where she was going with this.

“I don’t *want* to punish anyone, but I must follow through.”

“You think he is guilty?” Still, impassive as ever.

I sighed, this is not getting easier. “I get your point, but I can’t also go back on my word.”

She nodded pensively. “How about you send a message to him, that I ask for no retribution, and accept that I was acting evasively if he accepts that he was unnecessarily rude? That you will respect my decision—as you are asking him to respect me,” she said the last part clearly for me. “And will also mention that hostilities to strangers are not the policies of Blakemore and any of its packs, and if he ever is confronted by suspicious individuals, then the course of action is not aggressivity, but to contact the appointed parties who will take care of the situation, and will be aware if there is reason for worry or not, rather than accidentally causing strife as he did,” she said casually, then looked up at me. “If you want to insist on discipline, you may mention that if such a thing occurs again, there will be no leniency.”

I blinked.

Well, ain't she diplomatic.

She tilted her head to one side, questioningly at me.

"Right," I said. "That would make absolute sense."

"Of course it would," she said and took another bite.

"Well, you were really worried about being able to handle a Luna job. I think you might do fine."

She looked back up at me, her mask shattering on the edges. She was controlling her emotions so much, but this, she didn't control fully yet.

After lunch, I accompanied her back to my place and promised to get in touch with security for her. I wasn't sure of what to do so she wouldn't just get bored in there, but she assured me she had a few books she wanted to read. So I left her and went back to the office.

I went to Brandon for him to take care of the message Elaeya mentioned.

I had no idea who the guy was. I've spent so much time running around from places to place, or either burying myself in work, that I've not connected with my people in a very long time. Not to mention how many of them there are. Most Alphas know all of their pack members by name, I didn't even recognize his face.

There was probably a long list of people like that. That I never even knew existed, yet were my people.

I took care of a few things that piled up and called a meeting up.

Thirty minutes later, I was in the conference room with everyone. I had called my father, grandfather, Darren, Brandon, Ylva, Anders, Sam, Mishka, and Dimitri.

"Lock the door," I told Brandon.

He complied.

"What I will say here will stay here. I called a representative of the Council of Elders." I nodded at my grandfather. "One of my Alphas." I nodded at my father. "One of my team." I nodded at Darren. "One of my Captains." I nodded at Dimitri. "Two of my best warriors" I looked at Ylva and Anders. "For the few of you who might not know, I found my mate. I'm not ready to let this information out, as she's still very new to this pack, and have not been made a member yet."

There were a few nods.

"Now, I will not get into details at the moment, but I might in due time. I also want to limit this to those who already know, as much as I can. What I will tell you for now is that Elaeya is a hybrid, and part of her nature is something that has been hunted and killed for centuries. Her

kin is officially believed instinct, and what little survivors there are, are probably relying on this to stay hidden and survive. She has spent all her life away from societies, especially the supernatural kind. As a stray, she's still adapting to a pack, but I will probably not be able to keep her a secret for long. Which is why her security will have to be taken care of. She will have a bodyguard with her at all times."

I looked at Anders and Ylva. "If any of you is not interested in this gig, I would appreciate if you helped me find the right warriors to take care of this." I turned to Dimitri. "We will augment security at the borders and also on the main Blakemore packland."

Dimitri nodded.

"She stays with me or on packhouse land generally, but I want her to be able to move around if she wishes it. You will also contact Blakeden city hall," I turned to Darren. "I want more surveillance in the streets, and a detailed census of the population, including detailed information of all non-pack members. We can lend warriors to Blakeden if necessary."

"Done," said Darren.

"Also talk to Eva. She's already spreading the word on Elaeya," I turned to my father. "And warn the girls and Mom too. I will use all the time we can get until this comes out."

"That might be more difficult than you think," my father told me.

"Let's just do what we can and prepare for the worst," I said.

I turned to Brandon. "I also want all information you can get on the supernatural black market. What are the main operatives, or if any of them is getting a little too interested in Blakemore."

"You expect involvement from that side of the world?" asked Brandon a little surprised.

"From the data we've had, her kind has been sold on the black market pretty actively, for breeding, or parts, and not necessarily in that order." I saw a few faces scrunched up in disgust. "Most of them as been trafficked, raped, or just killed. I want to know also from the hitman community if anyone gets a hit." I turned to Mishka. "Look into any of your contacts, I want to know as early as possible. You see any words on an abnormally expensive hybrid out there, it's possibly her. Apparently, her kind gain value with hybridization."

"Nothing gain value with hybridization," Brandon said.

"Technically, that's right, because those that did, had been wiped to extinction. Maybe the interest as died down, but I'm not taking risks. Also, apparently they've been used for political gain, so any stirring in the community coming our way that doesn't seem to connect with anything, look into it, that could be it."

"What kind of thing makes the black market, hitmen, and supernatural politicians excited and take value with hybridization?" asked Mishka, far less cocky than his usual self.

“I may give you this information at some point, but not now. Either when she’s ready, or when we’re out of options.”

“Damn,” muttered Dimitri, shaking his head in aversion. “You rolled the jackpot,” he said sarcastically.

“That’s not the tone you would use if you’d seen her,” said Darren.

My father snorted.

“So?” asked Mishka. “Everything in the right place?” he said mimicking a curvy silhouette with his hands. He wasn’t just being an idiot again—though that was generally a good conjecture when he was concerned—, it was also a reasonable assumption as someone like Ylva was pretty lucky in the hybrid community. The fact that she had human blood probably helped spare her from deformities. No matter how much she hates her human heritage. Most hybrids are not that lucky in the looks department.

I gave Mishka a pointed look. He shrugged unashamed and just leaned against the wall.

“Just asking,” he said. “For your own good, of course.”

Ylva punched his shoulder.

I nodded my thanks to her.

“So that will be it for now,” I said.

“Wait,” said Mishka.

I had to force myself not to roll my eyes, Ylva looked at him like she was ready to punch him again, but he walked to the conference table and pulled a notebook that he laid on the surface, followed by something as long as my hand, cylindrical, and wrapped in a dirty cloth.

“I heard Hellhound senior,” he pointed at my father.

“Technically,” interrupted my grandfather. “I’m Hellhound senior,”

“Wait, there’s three of you?” said Mishka aghast. “Wait, you’re grandpa Hellhound? Damn man. Aren’t senior citizens supposed to lay low and stop bench pressing locomotives or something.”

That got a few snickers. Mostly from Darren and Dimitri. I’m pretty sure Brandon’s sense of humour has been amputated at birth.

“Now, if you’re done being intimidated, you can tell us what the bloody hell is this thing,” said my grandfather. “I’ve better things to do than scare children, you know.”

“What has this world become,” Mishka grumbled. “Can’t be intimidated in peace.”

He moved his hand to the cloth and wipped it off in a flourish. “Tadaaaaaa!!!”

It was a knife.

I looked at him in exasperation.

“As I was saying, middle Hellhound,” he said waving at my father. “Did mention, discreetly—and know that I was not eavesdropping on purpose,” he told him. “That it was not a good idea to let the Brotherhood get their hand on any other artifacts, so I sneaked this one out.”

“What type of artifact is it?” my father asked. Everyone more serious now.

“Not a clue,” he said jovially. “I did some research, but I found nothing. The pad, on the other hand, contains a lot of information about artifacts from all over, who has them, how they’re guarded, that type of thing. Really not good to leave in the wrong hands.”

I signed at Brandon and he took the pad.

“Okay,” I said to my father. “Put this with the others, and we’ll sort it out later.”

I clapped my hands.

“That’s it for now. I’ll talk to the two of you before you leave,” I told Ylva and Anders.

“He didn’t even include me in the best warrior list,” mumbled Mishka mock angrily. “I kick ass, you know,” he said as he left dramatically.

“That man is so weird,” said Darren.

“But he is one of our best,” said Dimitri.

“Don’t let him hear it, or it’ll go to his head,” I said.

Ylva snorted.

— Chapter Twenty-Nine —

THE END OF SOMETHING

— Kaden —

“So,” I said. “Security detail.”

“I’m in,” said Anders automatically.

I nodded.

“I’m okay with this if I can still go to battlefields,” Said Ylva.

“Well, we might need a few more anyways for rotations,” said Anders.

“Got anyone in mind?” I asked him.

“Sure,” he said.

“See what you can do?” I told him. “I will let you sort out who takes which shifts.”

“I think Ylva should take day shifts, it might be more subtle to see two women together than a man shadowing her,” said Anders.

Ylva raised an eyebrow at him. “You think I’m subtle.”

“No, but you could look like a more plausible friend than me. We are supposed to go for subtlety, right,” he asked me.

“As much as we can,” I told him. “I’ll put this in your hands. You’re in charge of her security detail.”

He nodded.

“Go,” I told him.

He looked at Ylva, but turned around and left.

Ylva crossed her arms and looked at me pointedly.

“You don’t have to do this if you don’t want to,” I told her once Anders was out.

“Why, because we had sex?” she asked.

I shrugged.

“I don’t give a rat’s ass about who you shag. We’ve never been exclusive to begin with.”

“Which is why you’re here. In part,” I said. “But again, if it bugs you, I can get someone else, you can keep your old gig.”

“You’re gonna need a new bodyguard,” she told me.

“Sure, but I’m not gonna leave Blakemore for a little while.”

“Right,” she said. “So things will probably be more exciting here with her than with you.”

I scoffed. “Maybe. If things go really, really wrong.”

“Cool,” she said and sat down.

I shook my head and sat too.

“She should learn to fight,” I told Ylva.

“That’s the best form of protection,” she agreed.

“I don’t know if she knows anything about self-defense. I don’t know if she’s in good physical shape either.”

“But you need to know to evaluate how much training she needs.”

“Mostly.”

“You want me to do it?”

“Let’s go gradually, start with running maybe. See where she stands. Then we can plan a training program.”

“What if she doesn’t want to?”

I shrugged. “Let’s cross that bridge when we get there.”

She shrugged.

“Okay, well, she’s at home now so everything should be okay, maybe you can come in tomorrow morning to make introductions?”

“Sure,”

She got up.

“Ylva,” I said.

She looked at me.

“Thanks.”

She furrowed her brows. “Is it really that bad?”

“What?” I asked.

“The things that could happen to her.”

“The more I learn, the worst it gets,” I said. “Maybe nothing will happen. I’m just never been the type to take chances.”

She nodded thoughtfully.

She took a few steps towards the door.

“Will it work out?”

“What?”

“The two of you?”

“I would like to say that I don’t know and don’t care so much at the moment, but the more things go on, the more I want to make it work. And I think she’s starting to think long terms too.”

“Will she make you happy?” That was an uncharacteristically odd question coming from Ylva.

“I don’t know,” I said truthfully. “But it’ll be nice if she did.”

She gave me a withdrawn smile. “It would be nice,” she agreed. “Take care of yourself Kaden,” she said as she left. There was an air of finality to the words.

I supposed it was the end of something. There was a melancholic weight left my heart for a few beats. It wasn’t heartbreak. Ylva and I had never been in love.

But there was an air of change that I suppose I was never truly prepared for.

I got my ass off my chair and went to my office. I had calls to make.

* * * * *

“So,” I said. “What’s the verdict?”

“Laeticia as cleared my schedule ahead of time,” Said Jean-Philippe. “I might be coming in tomorrow.”

“Good, bring the contracts.”

“Sure,” he said. “Is Eva still with her mate?” He tried for a casual tone, but it sounded nothing like it.

So, the guy had a crush on my sister, huh?

“Yes, he’s my Gamma now, they moved in together a couple of months back.”

“Ah.” Again, he tried for casual, but man the kid still has bread crusts to eat.

“There is something else that I wanted to talk to you,” I changed the subject.

“Okay, shoot.”

"You might have heard of my little war on Nubinero."

"Oh, man. Rumours are going wild again."

"Okay, well, there might have been two other packs involved in similar shit. I don't know if they were in league, or just inspired by one another, but I gave the information to the Brotherhood."

"Which?"

"Greysky and Akayume."

"Never heard of them."

"One is in the U.S., and the other in Japan," I said. "Technically, as I'm the one who brought this to the Brotherhood, I'm the one who should pursue this avenue with them. Only they're not keen on me working with them right now, especially on these cases as they think I'm using this to make a power move."

"So you want to call up a third party?"

"That would simplify things a little."

"You want me to call them?"

"It could be better if it comes from you. If you need to go in person, I'll send you as many warriors as you want. But it'll be under your leadership."

"Erm," he hesitated.

"You can do this kid, I'll send you captains to lead the way. They took care of Nubinero and a lot of other crap. If you want more back up, I'll send Jayson, my Beta, to back you up. My people can do all the heavy lifting if you need it. But for the Brotherhood, you're in charge."

"So you lead from the back?"

"No, you do all that you're comfortable to do yourself, and I'll send you loyal competent people to help you with whatever you're not comfortable with," I said. "I know you've never done this. That could be a good way to start, to learn."

"Right," he said. "Might as well start somewhere."

"Might as well."

"And I sort of owe you a lot."

"And I owed your father. Let's not start counting favours now."

"Right."

"Thanks."

“I might come in a little later now though.”

“Do what you can, and keep me posted.”

“Sure, I can do that.”

— Elaeya —

I had been reading on the roles of Lunas for a few hours when someone knocked at the door. Mrs. Raynolds went to open up.

“Hi,” said a young girl with curly black hair cut around her jawline. I recognized her as one of Kaden’s sisters. The youngest I believe, Amy.

“Hello,” I said, putting my book down and getting up.

“Well, it’s pretty much one of the last good days of summer and we have a heated pool ready to use and everything and we were thinking that maybe you could come. You know, to get to know each other and everything.”

I pursed my lips. “I don’t think I have a bathing suit.”

“You have, Miss,” said Mrs. Raynolds. “May I fetch it for you? I can prepare a bag.”

I hesitated.

“Please, please, please,” said the girl. “It’ll be nice. We’ll chill together and have a bunch of people ogle at us. It’ll be fun.”

My eyes widened a bit. Is that what is fun?

“Come on,” she said coming up to me and wrapping her arms around mine. “You can bring her bag by the pool,” she told Mrs. Raynolds.

She nodded and mouthed silently to me ‘have fun, Miss’ in her usual smile. And then I was dragged away.

I wasn’t sure this was a good idea, but I didn’t find the heart to tell the girl off. I could simply sit by the pool and watch, right?

We followed a few paths going to the packhouse. We crossed paths with a tall blond woman, maybe an inch or two shy of six feet, dressed in leather pants and with a sword strapped to her back.

“Oh, hello Ylva,” said Amy.

I recognized the name from the conversation Kaden had when we were at Monaweard.

The woman nodded and kept going. Until she did a double-take and turned around to us.

“You’re Kaden’s girl?” she asked me.

I knew she and Kaden has had a relationship.

I nodded and centered my weight on my feet, letting myself loose from Amy's grip.

"Kaden said you'd spend the day at home," she told me.

"Well, you can't expect her to be locked up in that place on a day like this," said Amy.

"There are days when I wonder how you girls managed to survive while being this oblivious," she told her.

"Oblivious to what?" Amy asked.

"Exactly," Ylva said. She looked at us. "I'm coming."

"To swim?" asked Amy

"Oh, hell no," she said. "To make sure no one does anything stupid."

— Chapter Thirty —

THIS MUST HAPPEN

— Ylva —

Well, I could see what Darren meant. I'd definitely do this girl.

I thought I saw her change her stance, prepared for a fight. Maybe she's not completely useless after all. That might make it useful if she's to become Luna. Or just to survive.

Smurfette dragged Luna-in-waiting to the pool. What was her name again? Ela-something?

The other Alphettes were next to the pool waiting for them. Wait, there were two missing. Well, Eva works now, and I have no idea about the other. So, four spoiled princesses trying to corrupt their future queen. Queeny, on the other hand, seemed like she had no idea how to handle the situation. She mostly just stood there awkwardly until one of them dragged her to a chair.

They all looked strangely at me. I'm not the kind of chick to chill by a pool. So I just retreated a little in the back. I found a good position with my back against a wall, with a good overview of the girls and all main entry points.

There were some talks, nothing really worth mentioning, then people began appearing. It was just a few girls at first, then a few boys. I say boys and girls, because there was probably not a single one of them older than twenty-one.

My guess is, the Devon girls called a crowd to party.

Queeny, didn't seem to agree with that plan.

I would not either. That is not what the Alpha ordered. This is not discretion.

I was about to get up to tell her so, when I saw her get up herself.

It hadn't been a full hour since we've been there, but there were nearly twenty, sixteen to twenty-one, kids swarming around the pool, and I saw some beer bottle pop out of all sorts of places.

The packhouse is technically public space. But it's there only for the member of Blakemore proper, but it could also be for whomever they invited, and though those Devon girls didn't have specific titles amongst the pack, they still, strictly speaking, outranked me.

Well, if we got really technical, Queeny had the potential to outrank us all. She was not even Blakemore at the moment, but unless she tried to go against a direct order of the Alpha, her word had more weight than any of us. She couldn't force anything to happen, she couldn't challenge the Alpha, but she could still order people around if she wanted too.

But she looked like a scared doe about to run off into the woods.

To her credits, she didn't look that scared. It wasn't fear that was written on her face, uncertainty maybe. But behind a nigh impassive mask, I saw that the situation made her very worried.

If Kaden was right about the things that were done to her kind, if things like that were the boogeyman stories of her youth, then today could feel like potential for nightmare fuel.

She was a little too polite for my own taste. She never did anything to upset the Devonettes, even when she clearly just wanted to leave. But I guess they are in-laws. People are nice to in-laws, right? Or is it the other way around?

Anyways, she got up, inclined her head politely to the closest people, and bid her farewell. So I got up my ass and made my way to her.

"Hey, where are you going?"

"The party is just starting."

A few of the closest people to her got in her way.

"What? No, you can't go," said one of the Devon girls. "Look, I'm sorry for the other time. I didn't want to insult you. You were just being odd, and I wanted us to be friendly, and I thought this was a good idea to get to know each other, and connect, and make up, and it's a family thing, you know," she said in nearly a single breath.

"I am not angry, so do not worry," Queeny said. "But this is not a great idea, at the moment."

"What? You think you're too good for us or something?" said a red-head that had been particularly loud since she came.

"What?" said another girl next to her.

I sensed that the whole thing was about to devolve.

"That is not my mindset," Queeny said.

"Mindset? Who talks like that?" red-head said. "Did you come from a posh school somewhere?"

"I haven't seen you around," said one of the guys.

"I am not from here, and I should go," Queeny said.

"Look Missy, Jasmine did this for you," she pointed her finger at Queeny. "And you don't even thank her and just want to run off."

"Karla, it's fine," said Jasmine with a bit of a pout.

"I am sorry for sounding rude, that was not my intention," Queeny said. "But it does not change facts."

“Maybe you’re not hanging out with the right crowd, precious,”

“Karla, that’s enough,” said a guy next to her.

“I’m not finished,” I think that girl had managed to have a little too much alcohol. In what little time they’ve had to drink, and given how resistant werewolves are to being drunk, that was a somewhat impressive feat. It’s like teens every year find a way to get drunk faster than the previous generation.

“Do you know where you are?” Karla asked. “Maybe this place is not for the likes of you if you can’t learn respect. Maybe you should take the place that is yours.”

I saw Queeny’s eyebrow twitch.

I stood just behind them. “This is enough kids. Maybe you should all go home.”

“You can’t order us,” she told me, which was true. “What are you, playing Amazon with that sword?”

Oh, I want to gut her, from navel to nose.

Kids, they don’t know shit. Most of them have not even seen a training ground.

I took one step towards her, but Queeny raised her hand the slightest in my direction, telling me to stop. I did so on instincts.

Huh?

“Just go back to the hole you got out of, and leave. You’re not worthy of this place, or these girls. They shouldn’t have invited you here, to begin with, snobby bitch,” said Karla.

That escalated quickly.

“Where are the training ground?” Elaeya asked Karla calmly.

“Heh?” she replied wittingly. Most of the others looked at her confused.

“The closest training ground?” she asked again. As there were no answers, she turned her gaze to me.

“There’s one on packhouse land, not far, east.”

She nodded thanks to me.

“You want to train now?” asked a shirtless guy with a beer next to her. There were more than a few odd looks coming her way.

“No, I do not wish to train. I have been told about packs, respect, and positions a lot lately. As was I told about my position.” She closed her eyes for a brief moment inhaled slowly, then exhaled, her face melted in absolute stoicism, all emotions invisible. “It seems I have a point to make.”

“What kind of point?” asked shirtless dude.

“About my position.”

There were a few ‘huh?’ going again. Man, did I looked this dumb when I was young?

“Positions are asserted through strength and conflicts resolved with challenges, are they not?” Queeny asked me.

My eyebrows went way up. “Yes,” I admitted.

She then looked at Karla.

“I’m not fighting you, my mate is gonna stop you if you try to hurt me,” she said tugging at the guy arms next to her arm.

“He’s your champion then?” I asked.

The too of them blinked at me. His eyes widened realizing what was going on. She didn’t catch on right away.

“You can’t fight her, she’s my brother’s girlfriend,” said Jasmine to them.

It took a couple of seconds for the information to process, then everyone’s eyes got really big.

Queeny sighed. “I suppose this is exactly why this must happen,” she said. She never raised her voice through the whole thing, she was the epitome of calmness. The only emotion I’d gotten from her was mostly discomfort, and now, a sort of resolute sadness.

Her words sank slowly.

She wasn’t wrong. If she was to be Luna, then it meant that challenges to her authority had to be addressed, and strength was the best way to discourage further infractions.

“Lead the way,” she told me.

I turned east bound and we headed for the training ground.

“Come, now,” she said. Her voice was not any louder. There was no command in it like that of an Alpha either, but there was authority regardless, and within minutes, we were heading to the training ground with a bunch of post-pubescent knuckleheads in our wake.

— Chapter Thirty-One —

I HAVE A POINT TO MAKE

— Ylva —

“You sure about this, Queeny?” I asked her as we marched to the training ground.

“Don’t call me that,” she asked, not looking at me.

“I don’t remember your name.”

“Elaeya,” she said.

“Okay, but my question still applies.”

“I am not sure of anything at the moment,” she admitted.

I nodded. “The Alpha prone discretion, at the moment.”

“I am sure he does. It is a wise decision.”

“Yet you don’t go for it?” I asked.

“That ship is sailed.”

I looked behind us, there was a mix of excitements, anticipation, curiosity, and anxiety coming for the crowd behind us. Karla and her boyfriend were nearly dragged to follow us.

“I guess you’re right,” I admitted.

We walked a few more steps in silence before I spoke again. “I’ve never seen the girl on a training ground. It doesn’t mean she knows nothing, but she’ll be an easier opponent. The guy though, I’ve seen him train.”

“Is he good?” she asked me.

“Moderately so, for his age at least.”

“What kind of training is given here?” she asked me.

“The basic includes hand-to-hand, and shifted. Most will get weapons too, but I don’t know, at his age, if he qualified for those yet.”

“What am I to expect?”

“He should know grapples, projections, kicks, fists, and ground, at the very least.”

She nodded.

“But you don’t need to deal with that, I can champion for you,” I told her.

She nodded again. “But you will not.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Why do you think the situation escalated so?”

I thought about it. “She told you to leave, that this was not your place, that the Devons were not your crowd. This is both disrespect and a challenge. If you bent to this from the get go, no one will respect you. They’ll act all nice because they’re terrified of your mate. But the second he’s not there to back you up, you lose your authority.”

She nodded. “Originally, the Alpha pair was chosen amongst the strongest, was it not?”

“Sure,” I said.

“So if I don’t show strength after such an affront, then my position will be forever questioned, and the choice of Kaden to support me could be questioned too.”

I sighed. “That’s why I hate politics. It’s always so complicated.”

She nodded. “If you fight for me, it shows that you are faithful to your Alpha, but it says nothing positive about me.”

“Not really,” I admitted. “But you’re not staying under the radar either.”

“And you think I could have stayed so for long?” she asked me.

I looked at the Devon girls behind my shoulders. “I guess not.”

“This choice had already been made for me when I accepted to come here. I was simply not ready to accept it.”

“Well, I hope you can fight, because heads will roll if anything happens to you,” I said as we approached the training ground.

I think I saw a faint smile on her lips, briefly.

The crowd circled the grounds. Elaeya walked quietly to the centre.

I saw Karla try to slither away, but someone dragged her back to the circle, her boyfriend didn’t try to run, but he looked like he was watching his own funeral.

People understood what was happening. No matter how young they were. What she did, to the Alpha’s girlfriend, was unacceptable.

“Maybe we can try to sort it out another way?” asked the boyfriend.

Elaeya cocked her head.

One of the Devon girls walked forward. What was her name? Amy?

“She shouldn’t have said that,” she told him pointing to Karla. She looked worriedly at Elaeya. Elaeya showed no emotions.

“I didn’t know he had a girlfriend,” Karla whined, horrified.

“She’s his mate,” Amy countered.

Karla’s faced paled even further, so did her boyfriend’s.

They understood that this didn’t just mean she was banging him, it meant, soon she’d rule them.

“Why are you doing this?” asked Karla to Elaeya.

“I have a point to make,” was all that Elaeya replied.

Boyfriend looked at Karla, then back at Elaeya, and took a step forward. So he’s going to fight for that girl. Either he thinks only with his dick, or it’s because she’s his mate. Either way, poor kid.

I stepped forward.

Elaeya raised her hand.

I stopped.

“You will not interfere,” she told me.

I could not really defy her in this. If it was me, I’d do the same, only there would be a lot more screaming and cursing. I put my hand on Amy’s shoulder and guided her out of the way. There was a wood fence on one side and I sat on it, watching very intently at the situation. If things went out of hand, I knew I’d have to interfere, whatever the consequences. I promised Kaden I’d look after her.

I didn’t really envy her position at the moment.

The guy looked like he was unsure if he had to go on his knees and let her punch him until satisfied, or try to fight without hurting her too much.

Both options would kill any possible career as a warrior. I’m pretty sure he was one of those who applied to become a recruit.

Plus, it would be extremely humiliating.

There was no way the guys behind him would respect a guy that didn’t even fight back. But on the other hand, he was facing a situation that would lead to a very angry Hellhound coming right at him if he did anything. It was suicide at best. I didn’t envy his situation either.

“Fight,” was all Elaeya told him.

He looked at her half-confused, half-unsure.

"Fight," she told him again.

As he didn't move, she started to walk in his direction. She was not rushing anything. Her face betrayed no emotion.

He didn't move, but was looking around for options.

She raised her right arm as she reached him and stopped an inch shy of his chest.

There was a sound of impact, and the guy went flying back at least five meters.

I never saw the punch.

What the hell?

How fast had this been?

He went tumbling down.

She walked to him and said again, "Fight." Her voice was calm, but it was clearly an order.

As I saw her walk to him, I had a flashback to the first time I saw Sebastian Devon fight in earnest. It was chaos everywhere, and he would just walk slowly. He'd throw an easy punch on one who would attack him in the midst of the battle, caving the skull right in, and his feet would not even slow down. It was a slow walk, confident. It reminded me of all those slasher movies where the villain would stalk his victims, one slow step at a time, but always reach them in time, and always kill them. That was what Sebastian Devon looked like on a battlefield, and it had impressed the shit out of me.

I used to be screaming and rushing into battle as if the louder I was the more threatening I was. But that man could instil fear in me, without even coming after me. I started to change attack tactics then, but I never mastered the serial killer walk. Kaden did though. With the years, I saw him getting better and better at it.

The calmness and confidence, more terrifying than any insults or threats.

And that girl, walked exactly like that.

I leaned forward with a smile on my face.

The guy on the ground saw her come to him, and scrambled to his feet, probably unsure of what had hit him in the first place. I doubt he saw more than I did.

He took a defensive stance as she raised her hand again a little faster this time.

I didn't see the blow, but there was this 'smack' of impact and he went tumbling down and through the crowd behind him. The kids scrambled in all directions.

This time he raised his head faster, his eyes yellow, his wolf on the surface, his animal instincts crying to fight back.

He rushed her.

Everyone caught their collective breath.

His wolf took over and he forgot all possible restraint.

I saw Elaeya's eyebrow twitch, and she drew the faintest of a smirk on her lips.

She moved swiftly with the grace of a ballet dancer, but in small efficient movements, and rather than attack him back, or try to block him, or evade altogether, she used his momentum against him, applying the smallest of pressure to reorient his trajectory.

There was no punch, no blocks, and his momentum brought him downward rather than forward. He tried to catch himself before it was too late, but her foot blocked him and he face-planted at top speed.

He hit with a 'crunch' that sounded painful.

At this point the crowd was cheering and jeering.

She turned casually to him, raised her eyebrow cockily, daring him.

His face was bloody, his nose clearly broken. His eyes enraged. He probably had very little control over his wolf at this point, his human mind barely producing thoughts.

He came forward a little slower, but not much. His stance a little straighter, so it would be harder for her to do what she'd just done to him.

So instead, she didn't move until he got close enough to not be able to readjust to her movements.

She lowered herself using his height against him. Half of his body above hers, his momentum again pushing forward, she used her hands up on him, rose up and flipped him like an egg.

He went back first, slamming against the dirt. He didn't take the fall as well this time, and had his breath punched out of his lung.

He wheezed painfully on the ground as she walked to him.

His eyes widened.

I grinned ear to ear.

She looked at him from above questioningly. Like nothing ever happened and this was just a kid running around that fell on his ass.

I doubt she was much older than him. But looking at each of their faces, experience made all the difference, and she had a lot more than him, and so, so much more control.

I guess that's what you called maturity.

I doubt that she'll ever lose command over her wolf like he just did.

There was the faintest satisfaction in her face.

I think I like this girl.

"WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON!" roared the loudest wolf I've ever heard.

I knew this roar.

"Oh, shit," I muttered.

— Chapter Thirty-Two —

FIGHT ME

— Kaden —

My phone rang. It was Jasmine. She never calls me during the day. Actually she pretty much never calls me unless something goes horribly wrong. Actually—scratch that—when things go wrong, she usually evades me like the plague. If she has anything to tell me, she'll come to see me in person, which would give her a good reason to sneak a peek at whatever is going on.

"Yeah," I answered.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," she blurted out.

"What's going on?" I straightened.

"I wanted to do something for Elaeya because of how things went last time, so I invited her at the pool with the girls, you know to get to know her." She was trying for conversational, but she was talking too fast for this to be credible.

"Jass," I cut her off. "What happened?" I felt my blood pressure peek.

"Someone got mean to her, and things escalated, and now Elaeya is going to face a challenge by combat with Mathias on the training ground."

"WHAT?"

"I'm sorry, I didn't want for this to go this way. Karla is usually nice, but she was drunk, and she was running her mouth off, and I lost control of the situation."

I was barely listening to her when I hung up the line on her excuses as I rushed out of my office.

It didn't take me long to ear the commotion ahead.

I could hear cheering and jeering in dissonance with one another. I went faster.

"WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON!" I roared as I spotted the crowd.

Silence fell instantaneously, and people parted as I walked in.

Kids, just a bunch of stupid kids.

There were more than a few people who saw me rush out of the building and followed suit. My roar probably attracted more, and soon the people of the packhouse would swarm here.

I spotted Elaeya in the centre of the circle of onlookers. She wasn't harmed and I let out a breath of relief.

I also spotted Ylva sitting on the fence on the other side of the circle.

“What the hell?” I snarled at her.

“She’s fine,” she said pointing her hand at Elaeya. “Her hair isn’t even ruffled.”

“This is not what I pay you for,” I growled.

“If you haven’t noticed,” she said pointing at a man on the ground with his face red with blood. “She just kicked his ass.”

I looked up at Elaeya, she looked clearly untroubled, as if she’d just taken a walk in a park.

“Why do I keep messing up?” I heard Jasmine whine in shame in the background. I’m going to have to deal with her eventually.

“Up,” I said to the guy on the ground.

He struggled to his feet, barely able to catch his breath, but did so.

Whatever expression I could see behind all the blood, was that of a terrified man.

“Now—,” I moved forward.

“No,” said Elaeya, raising her hand.

I stopped.

“This matter does not concern you,” she told me.

“What?”

“It is resolved.”

“Like hell it is,” I snarled.

Her features hardened.

I hesitated. “This should not have happened,” I growled.

“It had to be done,” she said.

“What? Why?” I asked confused.

The crowd around us grew in number as more people arrived.

“I had a point to make.”

Wait, did she mean she had something to do with this?

“Ylva?” I called.

“This is not for her to deal with,” Elaeya told me.

“This is very for her to deal with,” I interjected. “That’s why I pay her.”

“But not from this.”

“From any threats.”

“Why?” she asked me. “You want me to be your Luna, but you don’t think me capable?”

I froze. “That’s not what I meant.”

“That’s exactly what you meant,” she said. “You don’t trust me.”

Just like at lunch, I couldn’t tell what she was thinking.

I wanted to say, ‘I trust you’ but I hesitated. And she caught it.

She sighed.

I looked around. One thing I know is not to wash your dirty underwear in public.

“Let’s talk about it at home,” I said softer this time, and walked to her.

She took a step back.

I froze halfway.

“No,” she said, looking at the people around us. “It has to be taken care of here, and now.”

I looked at them too. They were seeing us disagree, if they saw no resolution, they could imagine whatever they wanted, which could be unfavorable. Politic complicates everything, including relationships.

That’s one of the reasons why staying away from relationships has been easier on me so far. Everything in my personal life is looked at under a microscope. And she knew that already.

We had to sort this out here.

She sighed. “I wished I would not have to do this.”

“Do what?”

“Make a point.”

At those words, I saw Ylva tilt forward in anticipation. I tried to ignore her.

“A point about what?” I asked Elaeya.

“About where I stand.”

I tilted my head.

“Fight,” she told me.

My eyes widened.

“I’m not fighting you,” I said behind my teeth. I hoped it was low enough for the others not to understand.

“You have too,” she said.

“Why?” I pleaded.

“For you to understand.”

“Understand what?” I asked in muted desperation as she walked slowly toward me.

“Fight me,” she asked.

“No,”

She was close now. She raised her right hand to my chest, as her skin got in contact with my upper body, I felt something like a hundred pound pillow smack me in the thorax at fifty kilometers per hours.

I went skidding backwards. I managed to keep my balance, but I was now a few meters away from her.

My eyes widened in confusion.

The impact area was too large for a fist, nor had I seen any fist move. Actually, it felt like the impact area had been spread wider to mitigate damage.

She walked toward me.

My instinct told me to back away, but I was kind of curious about what kind of attack that was, plus backing away would make me look weak, which would not be the best thing to communicate with my pack about the dynamic between her and me.

She raised her hand to my chest again, and I braced for it.

I dug my feet in as another impact resonated against my torso, only this time with more force. And still, I could not see where this was coming from.

She said her grandmother had been a witch, was this a magical attack? I didn’t feel the usual goosebumps that comes with magic spells, but there are a lot of different kinds of magic out there, and I’ve encountered just a fraction of what truly exists. Plus, there was a lot of mentions in books of spirit wolves having a sort of magic of their own. Was this it? I was thinking furiously as she walked to me again.

Only this time, when she raised her hand to my chest, I let my instinct kick in and block it, only she counter-blocked this. So I blocked that too.

I aimed at grabbing her wrists to stop sequence of attacks and blocks, but she kept slithering away like an eel. I didn’t let her have a good frontal shot like she did before, but she managed to

get an awkward one, slightly to the side, which had me repositioning. She tried to use this to get a good shot, but I barely evaded her in time.

She was good. Good enough to match some of my bests.

Her fighting style was different, graceful, her movements light yet calculated. She wasted no energy on flourishes. There were very little hesitations too. Which meant that she'd had to go through ridiculous amounts of training. No one gets this good, this young, without an insane number of hours of training for the movements to become nigh instinctual. Which made me think of how her posture is always impeccable, how her reactions, especially in public, always calculated, posed, controled. I guess discipline has been instilled in her from an extremely young age.

Thinking of how risky her living situation had been, it's not a bad choice.

But then I started to wonder where this comes from. She'd spend most of her life only with her parents. Are they the one that taught her? If so, then they are probably not people to take lightly.

I tried to pin her against me. I managed to swing her back to my chest and wrap my hands over hers, but again, she nimbly, slipped out of my grip. Both of us were not fighting with everything we had. I knew she didn't want to hurt me anymore that I wanted to hurt her, but this was building in intensity.

I couldn't deny that there wasn't a part of me that didn't enjoy fighting for it. And I saw it in her eyes too. Her breathing accelerated, and not out of exhaustion. There was something animalistic in battles, like in sex, that drove my wolf wild.

There was a part of me that wanted nothing else but to pin her to the ground until she'd stop squirming, bite her neck until pliant and take her from behind, in front of everyone, just to show who's in control. And the more she fought back, the more my instinct went wild.

I saw it too, the moment she realised what was really going through my mind. Her eyes darkened and she nearly faltered. Which made me smile wolfishly.

Our brawl was more intricate now, the movements wider, more violent, desperate.

I was testing her, her range, the strength of her attacks, but I never let her get another one of her invisible punches out.

She did pretty well, surprisingly well even. There was a little bit of pride in my grin.

And she realised what I was doing, nearly from the beginning—testing her. There was a part of her that really wanted to knock that grin off my face, and I enjoyed every second of this. The more she tried, the better it was.

She had a lot to prove, to me, to my people.

It also meant she was ready to take this on. She wanted to show that she can handle this. That she's worth it. Today, she was telling my pack, she was their Luna.

It meant a lot more than a job, or a brawl on training ground.

No matter how I enjoyed our little squabble, we couldn't keep doing this eternally. As I thought she'd had time enough to show she could hold her own even to me,I moved faster than I ever did since we started this and made a grab for her wrist and pulled her closer.

I saw her eyes widened, and something else too.

I'm not sure what it was but she was ready to fight harder. She might even pull something up like her first attack. Logically it would be something different, something I wouldn't see coming, magic maybe.

So I tripped her hard with my leg to stop her before she could do anything.

She fell.

I held her so she wouldn't slam too hard on the ground, and we landed down, one of my hands behind her head, my body pinning her in place.

Her eyes were huge, her chest rising and falling rapidly with every breath she took. The tension between us, reaching a peak. And I kissed her.

There was no restraint, no care, no delicacy.

She clawed at me, but not to push me away, but pulling me in closer.

Things got heated fast.

"Okay, there's nothing more to see," I heard Jayson say to the crowd, and it snapped us out of it.

Her eyes were dilated with lust, her lips swollen by that kiss, and I wanted nothing more than to resume what we were doing.

I got up fast, grabbed her hand and pulled her to her feet quicker than she could have done herself. Nearly flying up to the vertical. I kept my hold on her hand and made course for my place.

I didn't give the crowd a second thought.

The moment the door slammed behind us, I pushed her against the wall, her feet off the ground so that we would be at eye level. She twined her legs and arms around me, and we kissed.

There was no romance in that kiss, nothing but raw desire, and for a moment I thought I might be too rough and hurt her, but she never faltered.

I looked into her eyes, searching for a sign, something that would tell me if it was going too far, or too fast, or simply telling me to press forward even further.

At this distance, I could see every furrow, every channel in her eyes. The colours blending delicately like a flower in bloom. The hues were soft, her irises wide. I've never been the type to gawk at art pieces, but this was probably the best artwork I've ever seen, her laboured breath the soundtrack of her desire for me. There is nothing more satisfactory than to have such an effect on a beautiful woman.

I don't know how long I spent looking in those eyes, but it's only when she started to blink rapidly that I realised I'd been frozen in place.

This was not normal.

I recoiled, and took a few steps back.

She fell back on her feet, confused at my reaction.

"What just happened?" I asked.

"What do you mean?" she asked perplexed.

"I—," I hesitated. "I looked in your eyes and it's like I went offline, and I'm not sure what happened next."

She took a sharp breath in understanding. "You got lost."

"In your eyes?" I went from confusion to understanding as my mind reeled at maximum speed.

There are a lot of preternatural things out there. Things with all sorts of abilities. One of the first things I've been told about gods is to never look in their eyes, as some of them can pull you in. I know some sidhes can do that too. I don't think I've even encountered anything trying this trick on me though.

"Why?" accusations clear in my voice.

She blinked a few times. "I didn't do anything, you just went in there."

I blinked. "You mean you can't control this?"

"I could push forward if I wanted to, but you went in there on your own, it's a lot harder to control that. And—," She blushed. "I wasn't very guarded against you."

"Erm," I took another step back. I'm not sure I'm fond of the idea of having my mind messed up with.

"I could teach you," she told me.

"About what?"

"How to control this. Get in or out at will. How not to get lost on your way."

"So that I wouldn't get involuntarily hypnotized?"

“Or voluntarily.”

“Against you?”

“Anything that can do that.”

Well, that’s an interesting thought.

“So it couldn’t work?” I asked her.

“Nothing is impossible, but let’s just say you would have a powerful line of defence and would be even able to use this to your advantage.”

“How?”

“Eyes can be doorways. Doorways can go both ways. If you know what you are doing, anyone who opens that door could be in for a surprise.”

I smiled. “So no one is able to hypnotize you?”

“Let’s just say it is pretty hard to do.” She smiled mischievously back at me.

“Okay.” I grinned. “I’m in.”

— Chapter Thirty-Three —

ALL THAT COULD BE AND ALL THAT COULD HAVE BEEN

— Mishka —

“I thought you’d gotten yourself a new gig,” I told Ylva.

“I have, but it’s not stopping me from going to kick ass when the opportunity arises,” she told me.

“Is your stomach fine?”

“I’m healed.”

We were muttering to each other not to encroach on what was going on. We were in a big hall in probably one of the fanciest places I’ve ever seen. Every wall panel was covered in intricate detailing. There was a periwinkle blue that covered everything but the molding, which were gilded.

The Alpha of this pack couldn’t be much older than the minimum drinking age. He was complaining to Dimitri. “Nearly three weeks. They had to stretch this to nearly three weeks. It could have been done ages ago. Do they think Alphas have nothing better than to wait for them?”

“Bureaucracy,” replied Dimitri. “That’s generally how it goes.”

“Do they do this to your pack too, or is it because they think they can walk all over me because I’m young?”

“They do that to pretty much every pack, it’s just that the Hellhound doesn’t wait for them often, which scares and annoys them, so they try to rush things when they can when he’s concerned.”

Alpha Boisclair shook his head. “Maybe I should learn a thing or two from him.”

“I’d be careful if I were you,” warned Dimitri. “He does make things go faster, but he also burns a lot of bridges in the process. It depends on whether you want to pay the price for this or not. Most don’t.”

Boiclair nodded. “Yeah, but most are not backed by the kind of firepower he has.”

“True,” Dimitri admitted.

“I want this dealt with as quickly as we can. Then I’ll move to Blakemore for the rest of the week.”

“You’ll ride in with us?”

“Probably, if no one sets my house on fire.”

House, ha, ha. That’s funny. No one calls a castle a house—unless they’ve never lived in anything else, I guessed.

We were waiting for the Brotherhood’s contingent to join us so we could go and deal with Greysky.

Today was supposed to be for settling the battle plans, but they were making us wait.

Ylva was annoyed next to me, shifting her weight from one leg to the other, eager to get things moving.

I can’t say I feel any different.

— Darren —

I knocked on the Alpha’s door.

“Hey there, just to tell you I’ve gotten word from Boisclair, everything’s in motion, they will fly to the U.S. in the morning,” I said peeking my head between the door and frame.

Kaden had his head down, one of his low cabinets was opened to reveal a mini-fridge. He pulled-out a cold beer and straightened, waved his hand at me in acquiescence, and went to his couch unscrewing, then pulled a long pull before sitting down.

I slipped in and closed behind me.

“Everything okay?” I asked.

He shrugged. “I don’t know really.”

I nodded. I pointed at his fridge and he waved his hand giving me access. So I went and grabbed a brew to sit next to him.

“Anything to be worried about?” I asked after a while.

“Frankly, I don’t know.”

“Why the long face?”

“I just had a call with the Brotherhood. Something stinks.”

“Maybe you just need a shower?”

He didn’t find me funny, so I just smiled to myself and took another sip.

“The Brotherhood is all about order, bureaucracy, everything in its right place, going at the right pace, and as long as everyone complies, they’re fine with it,” I said. “But you don’t. You do things at your own pace, not theirs, your own way, not theirs. In the end, they’re wolf too. They’re supposed to be at the top of the food chain, but you don’t let them. You always deny

them that. And they know they don't have the strength to stop you, and it's the most annoying thing in the world. You're useful to them as a backup army. But I think they feel that this lack of control over you will come to bite them on the ass sooner rather than later."

"Yeah, I figured this much. I think they think I've already made my move with Nubinero. I saw an opportunity and took it."

"If we look at the situation from their perpective, their position is what has allowed them to control the werewolf population as a whole. By questioning their grip on our nation, you're telling everyone that they're not as powerful as they claim to be. That with just a little bit of will and resources, they can be overturned. You're probably giving really bad ideas to a few overly ambitious Alphas out there," I said.

"This is the worst thing that could happen. This is the best time for an upheaval, at least for anyone who wants to grow, which is exactly what Nubinero did, but at the same time, it erodes at the grip of the Brotherhood, and no matter how much of a pain in my butt they are, they're a necessary evil."

"Things would go so wrong if they fall."

We drank some more.The brotherhood had been what has kept the werewolf population unified, especially when other supernaturals were causing us issues. They were protecting the human world from stupid wolves who were not discreet enough, and consequently protecting us from the terrified humans who might think an inquisition 2.0 aimed at us sounded like a great idea. They protected us, from us, as much as they protected us from humans or other supernaturals. They were what maintained the balance. They were not flexible, or very pleasant, generally speaking, but they were order, they kept the peace, they stopped packs from constantly going to war against one another. They were needed.

"It's all about to change," he told me.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Elaeya."

"You mean about her getting politician nervous?"

"Yeah," he said. "I'm still unsure how to prepare for that one. I can raise an army to protect her, But I don't have anyone within the Brotherhood to coax on my side before it hits."

"You think it'll be bad?" I asked.

"I don't know. Maybe it'll lead to nothing." He drank some more. "I don't know how the pack will deal with her either."

"You think they'll reject her?"

"Maybe not. I doubt there's a lot of them ready to defy me," he said with a smirk.

I snorted.

“But they could make her life harder.”

I nodded. “How are things going with her?”

He shrugged. “She has a lot to adapt to. She keeps panicking every time there was more deliveries of clothes or whatever else Eva ordered for her.” He shook his head. “She stopped saying it. She tried not to let it show, but I know it disturbs her. Every time a domestic calls her Miss, I see the corner of her eye twitch.” He rubbed at his face. “I don’t get how these little things get to her so bad, but she’s now studying packs and Lunas, and everything and it barely affects her now. She had doubts about coming here, but she’s now taking it in strides. But having someone cook for her, makes her utterly uncomfortable. It makes no sense.”

“It makes sense,” I said. “To her.”

“Well, I’ll be damned if I figure it out.”

I empty my bottle and raised it to him, offering another.

“Sure,” he said.

So I got up to grab two more bottles.

“You said she’s a stray, right?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he said after emptying his bottle and dropping it on the coffee table.

“So, I suppose she’s not used to luxury living?”

He snorted. “She’s not used to hot showers.”

That got my brows up. “She stayed away from people, so not many people to take care of her?”

He shook his head. “Most of the time she’d eat what she hunted. But that’s not the thing. She was not used to packs or rank, but after a few weeks, it’s getting better. It’s the everyday stuff that is not getting better.”

“Because of power,” I told him as I handed him the bottle, and sat back down. “Adapting to a new life is not easy, but it’s easier when you control it.”

“She is in control,” he said. “I never asked her to do anything she doesn’t want to do.”

I nodded. “Which is why she’s adapting to a future position. Because that, she controls.”

He eyed me not getting it.

“Power dynamic,” I said. “As a Luna, she’s your equal. In the pack, she will have responsibilities and everything. It’s like a new job and she’s considering doing it. But the domestic part is different. You’re the one in power. Look at it this way. What happens if this relationship falls

apart. You have a house, money, a job, everything. Whatever she gains here is dependent on you. She can try to carve her own place by working for it, but the rest comes from you.

She's treated the way she is right now, not because she has worked for it, because of you. Right now, everything she eats, everything she wears, even peoples opinion of her, it's all relative to you. There's an imbalance."

He raised a brow questioningly at me, but he said nothing, thinking.

"It was this way when I came in. I was not me, but Eva's mate. Becoming Gamma has helped me carve a place for myself, but a lot of people still see me as Eva's mate, who is herself mostly seen as your sister. We are perceived and judged by our relation to another. Eva and I are used to it, to some extent, because we've been raised this way. Eva has no qualms about spending your money with gusto, because she's done it all her life. That's what she knows.

Elaeya, has never gotten something she has not worked for, she's never been dependent on another, and she's seeing that dependency grow. A relationship based on dependence is hard. We don't stop to think about these things very often because mate rarely separate, but let's say that's what happens after a kid or two—no matter how improbably that is. That dependency translates in her losing her job, her house, you could easily just tell her to leave her clothes behind, and it would be legitimate enough, because you paid for everything. She has to start her life from scratch. She could potentially lose the pack too. Could she even keep the children? Could she pay for school? Probably not, so she'd have to accept she'd probably lose that too. So either her life, as she knows it, is over, or she grits her teeth and keep this going even if it doesn't work out—no matter how bad it gets—not to lose out.

One thing I learned recently is that though men and women can think of the same things, and reach similar conclusions, it's the whole road to that conclusion that is different. We men, think more in the here and now. Most women seem to be incapable of doing that without considering all that could be and all that could have been.

I mean, when you go to the biology of things, to perpetuate our species, men have a limited role in the genetic aspect of things. It takes little to no effort. Then we just have to make sure everything at the moment works. Do they need food, are they safe? Without mentioning those that don't want to get involved and just leave.

When it comes to women, intimacy itself can mean, pregnancy and all its bodily effects—which are many—, and raising the kid, and caring for the kid, and the next thing you know. You're thinking of having some sexy time and she's thinking of college tuition, or something like that. It doesn't mean there won't be sexy times ahead, but getting there is a lot different. That's why men are more prone to risky behaviours than women. It's also why we tend to die faster. We delve more into actions and less into consequences.

So she might not be explicitly thinking those things, but I'm sure there's a part of her that is uncomfortable with this uneven power dynamic and dependency. And those little domestic things just keep reminding her of this."

"Who are you and why are you a relationship guru all of a sudden."

I barked out a laugh. "I'm not that good, but I'm a good observer. I've spent most of my life on the sidelines looking at what happens around me. I'm not saying I have the answer on what is happening with her, but I'm pretty sure I'm in the right area code."

"Maybe," he conceded.

We finished our beers.

He got up and looked at me for a second, but said nothing.

"You're thinking you might have done the right thing by giving me this job, right?" I asked him.

"Get your ass out of here before I kick it," was his admission.

So I got up and left grinning.

— Chapter Thirty-Four —

BEHIND ME

— Ylva —

We were riding back from Greysky.

It had been a bit of a let down.

They had started the whole things with guns blazing, but the moment we snuck in and began disarming them, they surrendered. Even our enemies are becoming meek. Where are all the good ones gone?

As far as I knew, there had been no artifacts, no werewolf trafficking either. They were building a collection of sand and earth from various mystically powerful locations around the world, to use in rituals.

We did all of this for a series of jars of dirt.

Those jars seemed to have worried the Brotherhood, and the collection had been said to be significant. At least a decade's worth.

I guess what it was used for was not really good, but it was not my most glorious battle.

"Why are we not taking the same route?" asked a Brother named Bernard.

"We're trying to go around the empty land," said the driver.

"What is an empty land?" Bernard asked.

"It's a territory avoided by everything because of things hanging out there."

"It's not empty if there are things there," said Bernard, but the driver was interrupted before he could answer back.

"Road ahead blocked, there has been flooding in the area, we have to double down and go the way we came," said a voice on the comm system.

The driver cursed.

All the trucks in our convoy slowed down and turned around.

"We came that way, why is it a problem to return that way?" asked Bernard.

"Because we'll pass through the empty land after nightfall."

I suppressed a shudder.

There are a lot of things that thrive in the darkness. We may be well equipped to fight quite a large variety of nasties, but there are things much harder to deal with than others. Some immaterial things can't be hit by anything material, others fight with will, or with the mind itself. Whenever there is a place that is commonly avoided by mortals, there's generally a reason for it. But when the place is avoided by the supernatural crowd as a whole, that is not good.

There's always something bad enough, or nasty enough to believe it can handle anything, so when those avoid somewhere, it's for a good reason.

There were a few places that felt odd to me, when we drove through the first time, but the sun can have a purifying effect. When the darkness will hit, then it'll be a different game.

"Where is this empty land?" asked Bernard.

"Two clicks ahead," said our driver.

Everyone in the truck got silent.

The sun was barely visible above the mountains on our left. It took maybe a minute or two for it to hide below the horizon.

I tried to keep my eyes ahead.

Some things will leave you alone if you don't notice them. It's a strategy I've used more than a few times already.

As the light faded out, a massive shadow rushed pass us in front of the road. With my nerves so tight, I nearly jumped out of my skin, and only controlled my reaction at the last moment, as I realized no one else in the truck reacted. I scratched my arm as if this was all I'd wanted to do in the first place, but a dark mass far ahead, before which the shadow passed, twitched.

It had looked like a rock, but it moved, two long limbs rose on either side like enormous spider legs, and pushed it up. Beneath it, there were legs. The limbs were abnormally long and skeletal. The arms that had helped it stand up nearly dragged the ground, and from the torso, rose a head. And its eyes looked straight at me.

I closed my eyes instinctively.

I did not want to be noticed.

Whatever had been that thing, it had been cloaked in a massive amount of wrongness. I just knew that it had no place here on earth. I waited for what I thought would be long enough for us to pass it by, then waited a few additional seconds just to be sure, before I opened my eyes again.

I tried not to check for anything weird on the side of the road, and focus on the road itself. I saw nothing in my peripheral that was abnormal, but I felt the hair all over my skin rise up.

Something was wrong.

My breathing accelerated on pure instincts. There was a stench in the air that had nothing to do with smells and everything to do with fear. My gooseflesh intensified and I began to hear a strange rasping sound.

It was getting closer.

From behind.

And the sound came from inside the truck.

No one reacted, so I deduced that it was nothing they could see or hear. Being part Valkyrie, there are a lot of things I can perceive that no werewolf can on their own.

The sound crept in closer from behind me. The rasp guttural and louder now.

I suppressed a shiver climbing up my spine in a panic. If I showed any signs of acknowledgement whatsoever, I don't think I'd be able to fight it, especially in close quarters.

The stench intensified. It reminded me of rotten corpses and spoiled eggs. The rasping was nearly next to my ear now. I saw blackness in my peripheral appear next to my left cheek. And a smile nearly as wide as the head itself aimed at me. The flesh crusty and slimy at the same time, the eyes wide and without eyelids.

My stomach contracted on itself in pure revolution.

No one saw anything.

That thing was nearly on top of those behind me. I heard one of them rub at his arms as if he was cold, but that was all the reactions any of them showed.

Wolves.

I dropped my backseat down, probably pushing on the thing behind me, turned on my right side and laid back with my eyes closed for a pretend nap.

I couldn't let anyone know, I couldn't say anything. At the first sign I'd seen it, it would strike.

It was testing me. I could feel horrible appendages caress my skin, taunting me. I wanted to puke.

It went like this for nearly an hour, until the stench subsided, but I didn't dare move until we reached the airport.

I was doing a terrible bodyguard job right now, but there was enough warriors in this truck to handle any situation.

I had to protect myself.

When the car stopped, I was afraid to open my eyes, but I had to.

I went straight out, without looking behind me, just in case, and walked straight to the plane.

I saw Mishka look at me strangely, but I didn't give him time to say anything, and he didn't push forward.

That idiot is cleverer than he looks.

Once in the plane, I finally let out a breath I'd been holding all that time, emptying my lungs for the first time in hours.

People slipped inside the aircraft one after the other.

I was not sorry to leave this freaking place for good.

Fuck this place.

As I moved to the side, to allow someone to sit by me, I saw a dark shape crawl the ground around the tarmac through the plane window. Its head popped up as my eyes connected for the briefest of seconds, and I rapidly turned my back to it, as the plane began to move.

This was a damn Other.

Fuck!

— Chapter Thirty-Five —

THE IMPLICATIONS OF ANY OF THIS

— Elaeya —

I got up in the morning around the same time as Kaden and went for a run.

Ylva has spent her days with me nearly every day since she was assigned to be my bodyguard.

She was not the most talkative person, but I suppose I wasn't either.

I had been used to train nearly every day of my life, so when Ylva suggested for us to start the day this way, it suited me fine, and we kept this habit almost every day since.

We would run most trails of the packhouse land, and sometimes go further out of that territory. I was getting acquainted myself with the land. We would go off-trail at least a few times a week to really challenge ourselves.

She was in great shape, and we kept up well with one another.

A few of Kaden's sisters tried to join us, but they gave up after their first attempt—except for Eva and Darren. They were busy and would run with us only twice a week. Kaden, when he had time, would too, but he wasn't able to keep a regular schedule and would often stop short to deal with something.

It felt good to run, and work my muscles. It allowed me to clear my head, and have some quiet time away from everybody.

Blakemore packhouse land was constantly busy, and since the challenge, the rumours about me had spread like wildfire. There would nearly always be someone around, greeting me, or trying to make themselves useful. I had the feeling a lot of this was to get a good peek at me, to satisfy their curiosity.

After our daily run, Ylva would take me to the dojo inside the packhouse next to the gym and show me the ways Blakemore warrior fought, their tactics and moves. It wasn't too hard for me to keep up, but it was good to be acquainted with their techniques, know the way they operated, it was different from what I'd been used to.

Once this was done, I would take a shower, and start studying. I've gone through every books Mrs. Raynolds brought me. Anything from packs to more generic shifters anthropology, history, and hierarchy. I have asked to get some more Blakemore specifics too. Eva has brought me censuses and more documentation to be sure I would know what I needed to know.

Shae, Kaden's mother would come in the afternoons to give me a few pointers and to teach me what she could.

I was feeling like I'd been swept by a tsunami. I had stopped fighting the inevitable. I still was not sure if Luna was really my place, but at least I would be prepared for whatever may come. I had been assured that it was not an obligation from my part, and not all ranked members had partners sharing their responsibilities, but I could not imagine spending my life here being pampered and do nothing of my days other than spend money that was not mine, and doing nothing else. Expecting to be cared for, and protected, and respected, without the slightest effort for my part.

The thought alone made me cringe.

I knew Kaden was trying really hard to come back home for dinner every day, but regardless, he would spend more time in his home office than he would like.

We would spend a few hours together, and he would join me to bed every night, but we never spent as much time together as we did the first few days after we met.

We were both trying hard to adapt.

Today's run was different though. I kept feeling a tingling sensation on my neck and would rub at it subconsciously. I noticed Ylva doing the same too.

We had chosen to go off-trail this morning. The terrain was rough and our trek laborious. There was a pleasant burn that had settled in my legs, but I kept feeling like we were being observed.

I tried not to spend too much time rubbernecking around, but the feeling never decreased.

I know Ylva noticed my behaviours because before we had reached the midway of our run, she was spending a few extra seconds here and there sniffing the air, looking for any unusual scent.

She had been different since she returned from Greysky two days prior, but I could not figure out why, and she was clearly not willing to talk.

Today would have been a day which Eva and Darren would have joined us, but they were busy with the arrival of the Alpha of Boisclair, which was a friendly pack, or so I heard. The Alpha was here for a business venture and was lodging in the packhouse for the week.

I saw Ylva's eyes widened at something in the distance as we ran out of the woods, but she turned away from it as if nothing had ever happened, grabbed my arm before I could turn around to see what made her react and pulled me away, faster than we had run until then.

I did not question her.

I did not know her well, but I knew enough about her to be aware that she was taking my protection seriously, and she was familiar with these lands much better than I.

We went back inside the woods, cutting the distance short between us and the packhouse. We did not go around the thicker brushes, but went through, and I was slapped a few times by stray branches that I could not evade.

Ylva was spooked. I did not know by what, but she did not call for reinforcements either. She slowed her pace as we approached packhouse land. She nodded casually to the sentries as if nothing ever happened and we walked to the building slowly.

I was tired, sweaty, and not sorry to have ended it earlier than planned.

I scratched at my arm and found blood. There was a one-inch red line on my skin probably caused by a stray branched than whipped me. I took a handkerchief from my pocket and wiped the blood clean. The skin was mostly healed already. Once I had made sure there was no blood left, I held the handkerchief in my hand and set it on fire with a muttered word. I left the ashes fall down three seconds later.

Ylva eyes were searching me. I have not shown obvious signs of magic to anyone here yet. But judging from her eyes, she knew exactly what I had done, that I had been hiding it until now, and that I had wiped very thoroughly and very obviously any blood that could have been found, or used.

I was not sure that letting such information out was a great idea, but I was searching her face too.

In the end, there were no uttered words between us as we came to a similar conclusion.

I nodded to her and she nodded back. What this non-verbal agreement meant was that I would not speak of how she acted in the woods as she was not ready to speak about it, and she would not speak of what I just did as I was not ready to speak about it either.

We both took a long inspiration and moved to Kaden's house.

There were a few knocks on the bathroom door as I was taking my shower.

"Yes." There were only two people in the house, Mrs. Raynolds and Ylva, and I was sure Ylva was cleaning up in the other guest bathroom, as she had left some of her clothes in that other bedrooms for after our morning training.

"Luna Devon has invited you for lunch at the packhouse, as the family is entertaining a guest," Mrs. Raynolds told me through the door.

"Understood," I said.

So I prepared hastily and moved to the pack house a little early.

The triplets, Jasmine, Lisa and Gwen were chatting merrily on the terrace. The trees had gained in colours in the last few days as autumn was on its ways. The yellows and oranges were slowly melting to reds as the leaves fell down, leaving some trees as if they were on fire when

the sunlight reached the proper angle. The air was still comfortably warm, but the northern wind made us wear warmer clothes.

I loved the smell of the changes of seasons. Whenever we would go to a country where the climate was more constant throughout the year, I would always miss it.

I heard Eva talk animatedly to someone as she walked on the terrace.

The man with her was a few years younger. He had hair the colour or warm wheat, neatly styled, with a knitted cardigan and denim. The moment he laid his feet on the terrace he stopped dead, looking at the triplets with his eyes wide.

Jasmine froze mid sentence and turned dramatically to him.

He began fast-walking in her direction, but the pool was in the way and he had to circle it.

She did not bother, ran to him and knocked him off his feet and they both splashed inside the presumably cold waters.

Eva's hands were on her mouth and she looked both surprised and excited.

Gwen and Lisa looked confused at the two still under the surface.

I had stopped before I would have come too close and be splattered with water.

Everyone walked closer to the edge as they were still not resurfacing.

"Are they drowning?" asked Lisa worried.

"What just happened?" asked Gwen.

Eva opened her mouth to answer but stopped as their head pierced the surface to reveal the two kissing furiously.

"Mates," Eva said waving her hand at them.

Lisa gasped.

"Who is he?" Asked Gwen.

"Jean-Philippe Boisclair. The Alpha of the Boisclair pack."

Both girls gasped.

Eva's brows furrowed.

Jasmine and Jean-Philippe were trying to rip each other's clothes off, but were struggling as the wet fabric was clinging to their skin.

"This is enough!" said Eva loudly.

They both froze and turned to her, still in each other's arms, their clothes askew, their wet hair a tangled mess.

"Your lips are blue," Eva said. "Get out of the pool now."

Jean-Philippe blinked, somewhat confused, Jasmine looked like she wanted to defy her sister.

"You're a minor, Jass. You think Mom and Dad will approve of this happening right in front of everyone."

"I'll turn eighteen in a month," Jasmine contested.

"And you think Kaden won't be angry that his underage sister humiliated herself in front of the staff with a foreign guest?" Eva put her fist on her hips angrily. "Is this how you do business?" she asked at him. "Or how you're going to conduct yourself?" she turned to her sister. "He's an Alpha. You think he'll want, or need a Luna that can't even behave herself?"

Jasmine faced paled at the realisation of who he was. Her teeth were now clacking together.

Jean-Philippe swam to the side of the pool and pulled himself up. He extended his hand to her, and she swam in his direction to take it and pull out.

"Change," Eva ordered them. "Now. We eat in thirty minutes, you're going to be at the table, clean, dry, and you're going to behave yourself."

"Since when are you ordering me around?" muttered Jasmine deflated.

"Since now. You said it yourself, you're nearly eighteen. Does it still have to be your brother who makes you behave? Haven't you realized he has more than enough on his plate? He can barely spend time with his mate." She waved a hand at me. "Do you see her behave like you just did? Questioning everything and everyone? Jean-Philippe is not from this pack Jasmine, and he has rank. You haven't even stopped to consider the implication of any of this and you're angry that I stopped you from humping in the pool? You think that's what you want to teach Amy?" she said waving her hand as their youngest sister walked in on the scene. "A mate turns everything upside down, but it doesn't mean you can't act civilised. You're a Devon, act like it."

"What did I just miss?" asked Darren as he walked in on the situation.

Jasmine's head was down, ashamed and she turned to her parent's house to change.

Jean-Philipped looked like he had landed in the middle of a hurricane, and decided to go and change was probably a better idea.

"Gamma-power activate," said Gwen at her oldest sister in jest. The other two started laughing.

Eva shook her head and went back in.

Darren looked around confused but decided to follow after Eva.

"Well, this will complicate things," muttered Ylva next to me.

“I guess it will,” I replied, and we walked with the others, stepping on the wet stones on our way in.

— Chapter Thirty-Six —

YOU CAN GAIN NOTHING IF YOU DON'T RISK ANYTHING

— Darren —

"How is the transition going?" I asked Michael.

"Not as smooth as I'd hoped," he admitted.

I was in my office, video chatting with my eldest brother.

My mother has pushed for my father to retire, but being the ball of anxiety that he is, he's been having difficulty letting go.

Some of the administrative aspects of the position in Stonewillow pack had been transferred to my brother, but he was far from being a full-fledged Alpha, and the family company was still in my father's name.

"You'll get there," I told him.

"You're kinda more there than I am," he told me.

"I'm not an Alpha."

"You're Alpha enough," he said. "Anyways, how's business on your end?"

"Some days are easier, others are hectic."

"How was yesterday?" It was seven in the morning here, so obviously he couldn't ask about my day yet.

"Hella hectic," I admitted. "It started with a business ventures in France, then a couple of calls with packs that are not receiving the help the Brotherhood offered and looking for an ear to complain to, and finally my sister-in-law jumped on her mated when he popped up here, who is the Alpha of Boisclair."

"Boisclair, like the rich pack in France?"

"The one and only," I said.

"People keep pulling insane numbers out of their asses about their wealth." He snorted. "How much of this is true?"

"More than you'd expect. They're old money, like really old money. They don't have as many businesses as a lot of packs, but the interest alone on their investment portfolio is enough to make some small nations jealous. I think they have a jewel collection to rival European royal families."

Michael grunted in acknowledgement.

“I think their wealth got seriously out there when one of their Alpha married into actual royalty. The daughter of one of the Louis Kings of France. Can’t remember which one.”

“I’ve been told there as never been royalty with werewolves,” said Michael.

“There hasn’t been. They married a human princess. I think they married into the Hapsburg too. They saw mingling with the right humans as a better investment than staying amongst wolves, and it actually paid off. Most wolves just sneered at this, but look at them now. They are the main financier of the Brotherhood so they get plenty of favors from them, and I doubt they’ve had an Alpha doing serious work in the last ten generations,” I said. “Three generations back, their Alpha was playing in operas in his free time, which was at least once a week.”

“Damn, and now you’ll be related to one?”

“Possibly, twice in-law’d, but yeah. He’s a kid though. Only eighteen. He relies a lot on the Hellhounds for help, and security. News circulates a lot better now than it did centuries ago, and they’ve attracted a lot of negative attention. The Brotherhood has offered a lot of support because they are their main investors, but the Brotherhood has not adapted well to the increase in population in the last centuries. Their effectives are spread thinner and thinner every year, and they’re seeing enemies everywhere.”

“That would explain why it took me three weeks to get a reply.”

“Is it that bad?” I asked.

“Well, I suppose they don’t make packs like Boisclair or Blakemore wait as much as others, but Kyle Jones of Greenvalley had to wait nearly two months after them while they were having some serious rogue issues. By the time they returned his calls, things had escalated far too much.”

“Greenvalley is not that far, is the rogue situation home getting worse?” I asked worried.

“Yes. There’s a new Alpha gathering rogues. He tried to get approved as a pack, but the Brotherhood refused, and he had no true territory to begin with, so he decided to go after other packs in the area.” Michael rubbed at his face in exhaustion. “People are getting nervous. Especially small packs. Everyone is scrambling for alliances, but there are rumours that they’re using spies and infiltrating everywhere now. We don’t know what their strategy is, but we found a few deads, all in packhouses. No signs of breaking and entering, so they were probably in from the get go. A lot of computers and hard drives, and black books have disappeared too. It’s turning into the cold war. Everyone suspects everyone. People plays close to the chest, but at the same time, if we keep isolating ourselves, we won’t get the help we need to face them, and the Brotherhood is less and less reliable.”

“What about the alliances?”

"They look nice on paper, but no one is ready to share anything, and they keep shifting around, because there is always suspicion, which tarnishes any other in alliance with them, and so on." He sighed. "I've had constant headaches for two weeks straight."

"Damn, that's not good," I said. "We're pretty busy here, so I can't promise anything, but I can talk to Kaden. Maybe there's something that can be done."

Michael straightened. "That could change everything," he admitted.

"Maybe, maybe not. The Brotherhood is not our biggest fan at the moment, and we just got out of a war with an ambitious upstarts, getting into another would not help our situation. Plus, with all that, The Hellhound just found his mate, and now another of his sister did too. I don't know how much time is left in the days to deal with anything more."

He nodded. "But he has a pretty big team, right?"

"Yeah, and generally things roll normally regardless, and it might get into a more natural pace soon. But there's been some change of personnel." I pointed at myself. "Plus that mate. It's not easy to build a relationship while working over seventy hours a week. And she's a stray, she hasn't been raised in packs, she has to learn from scratch everything about packs and their power structure, and the responsibilities she will inherit. It might take her a little while until she can take responsibilities of her own and lessen the load."

Michael winced.

"I think she'll do fine. She looks like she's been born for this, she just needs to learn the theory, the rest will come in time."

Michael shook his head. "Everything slides off you like it's nothing."

I shrugged.

"Well, little brother, I'm glad you found your place," he told me sincerely. "How's it going with Eva?"

"Good, we found our pace, we like our house, we work a lot, but we like our jobs, and we make sure not to over do it either, we spend time together when we can."

"Any baby soon?"

"God you sound like my mother-in-law."

He laughed. "Mom made me promise to ask you," he confessed.

"Figures," I said. "And no. We both want kids, but we want to take our time, we want to settle our career first."

He nodded. "Marriage?" he asked.

"Mom?" I asked.

He grinned. “Obviously.”

“Well, you can tell her, not in the next few months.”

“Does that mean it could come later?”

“Maybe. We talked about it. But man, her family is not known for restraints. If we announce a wedding now, it’s probably gonna turn into a national event, somehow. I’m not sure if I’m ready for that.”

He laughed at my loss of composure.

“What about your love-life?” I asked, shutting him up instantly.

He shrugged. “At this rate, I’m probably going to die a bachelor.”

“You can date you know,” I told him.

He sneered humourlessly. “I know that, but if I date anyone right now, I’m setting expectations. Becoming Alpha complicates things now.”

“You can still date without marrying the woman.”

“I know that, but it changes the dynamics within the pack,” he said exasperated.

“Then date outside of the pack.” He didn’t seem to like the fact that I had an answer to every one of his rebuttals.

He shook his head. “I have a meeting in twenty.”

I looked at my watch. “Well, I should get things rolling too.”

We closed the conversation pretty rapidly after that.

I would like for my brother to be happy, but I’m not really the type to play matchmaker. Plus, he could have a mate about to pop up at any moment too. But the rogue situation down there, really bothered me. I wanted to do something, but it wasn’t my home anymore, and it was far. I’m not sure what resources I could have at my disposal to help them, and what reach it could have.

I needed to talk to Kaden, but I was afraid to hit a wall.

I guess you can gain nothing if you don’t risk anything.

— Kaden —

The day couldn’t end soon enough.

I’d sent a text to Elaeya not to wait for me for Dinner. The sun was already down. The days shorter and shorter as the month progressed.

The whole situation with Jean-Philippe had rendered him pretty much useless.

Granted I've had three days with Elaeya before life caught on to me, so I decided to give him some slack. I had difficulty imagining Jasmine as a Luna. But then again, Eva had not been the most reliable person I've known for most of her life, but she was a good Gamma, she worked hard, and I could count on her. But Jasmine was much younger. I don't know if she'd sort her life quick enough for something like this.

It's not like she could just normally date for a few years before making a move. Jean-Philippe was not from the same country as us. Even more so, his pack spoke a different language altogether.

The learning curve could be steep.

Mom had decided to take care of that situation for the moment, which was the best, given the situation.

And now Darren came to me with problems abroad. It's not anything I hadn't heard of, but it was more worrisome than expected.

In any other situations, I would have made a call to the Brotherhood to accelerate things, maybe they'd told me to make a move with their blessing, but given the situation, it was not a great or reliable option now. I could have made a call to Boisclair for their support, but their Alpha had difficulty un-gluing his lips from my sister's right now, and I doubted he'd be much help.

I made a few other calls, allies and such, but it was a tricky situation, and most were not ready to take risks.

If I made a move now, I could bring more heat from the Brotherhood, And I could end up doing campaign away from home for a while. With Elaeya here, I wasn't sure how well it'll go. I had wanted to spend at least a few months here first, maybe even tone down my involvement abroad. Give it a rest for a while. Let the dust settle.

But Stonewillow was nearly family—by alliances—but still. It could be a good thing to back them up.

I wasn't very fond of the father. But the few times I talked with Michael, I've gotten a good vibe from him.

It could be a good idea to forge alliances with them as he transitioned to power. Plus, we don't have that many allies in that region, it wouldn't hurt to gain some.

I'd buried my face in my hands, thinking furiously.

I'd had my nerves on edge all evening, and I didn't know why. Maybe it was the whole Boisclair thing, I don't know.

I sighed.

My phone rang.

Maybe I should just go home, eat something and go to bed early.

I looked at the screen, it was Mrs. Raynolds. I don't remember having her ever call me.

I picked it up instantly.

"Yes," I said.

"Alpha, it's Miss Elaeya. Something is wrong." My heartbeats spiked. "I heard commotion in the drawing room and I found her unconscious on the floor. Mr. Sam was here and he took her to the hospital in Blakeden."

"I'm on my way," I told her. I was already running through the empty corridor, and I rushed to the garage.

I called Sam's phone, but there was no answer.

— Chapter Thirty-Seven —

BECAUSE OF ME

— Kaden —

I called Anders to gather the whole security team ASAP.

I skittered the car out of the driveway, leaving a cloud of dust in my wake.

I called Sam again, nothing.

On the third call, he answered as I was pulling in the hospital's parking lot.

"What's happened?" I asked the second the line connected.

"I don't know. I went to talk to you, but the second I knocked the—I don't remember her name—the woman who works at your place dragged me in, and Elaeya was on the floor, as pale as snow—I mean, paler than usual."

"How is she?"

"Breathing, her blood pressure is abnormally high, and so his her heartbeat. I'd gotten her a private room in the VIP wing and sent a message to the doctors of who she is, so they rounded up quickly."

"Was there an attack?" I asked.

"I saw no sign of any. I don't know what happened. But the doctor found a bunch of scratches on her, nothing deep, but they won't heal."

"What caused them?"

"I've no idea, man," Sam told me.

"Where in the VIP Wing?"

"Room 309."

"On my way." I hung up and sent a message to Anders to meet with everyone in the lounge area next to her room.

When I barged in, Sam was sitting on one of the sofas and a nurse was taking Elaeya's temperature. She jumped at my rushed arrival, put a hand on her heart, and looked at me reproachfully, but she said nothing to me and resumed her task.

"How is she?" I asked.

"Fever, 41.7," the nurse replied.

"She's sick?" I asked.

"Yes."

"What about the cuts?" I asked as I moved closer.

"I don't know. They're not bleeding, the doctors don't know yet. Maybe she cut herself as she fell and she's too weak to heal," she suggested.

"Maybe," I conceded.

There was sweat on her forehead, but she didn't move. She was much paler than usual.

There were a few knocks on the door.

I went out. I would probably not help anyone by worrying by her bed anyways.

In the following minutes, I talked to most of her security detail. No one saw anything other than Sam rushing out with her in his arms. No sounds, other than one who heard the same thing Mrs. Raynolds heard. No smell either.

I saw the doctor go in while we talked.

After a few fruitless minutes, I dispatched them. They stayed nearby just in case. But I was not sensing, or smelling anything fishy around either.

In the room, the doctor was looking at Elaeya's neck.

"Take a photo of this," he told the nurse.

"What have you found?" I asked him.

"A puncture mark on her neck," he told me.

"She was attacked?"

"I don't know. Could be from the fall, but it's clean, there's no scratches around the opening, so it could be inflicted by someone."

I pumped my fists a few times.

I promised her she would be safe in *my* pack. She had been in *my* house, with *my* warriors looking after her, and she landed in a hospital bed.

My jaw clenched and unclenched as I walked to the other side of her bed.

I heard a knock on the door.

It was probably Ylva who'd been the only one I hadn't interrogated yet, but she hadn't been on duty at the time, so I doubted she knew more than the others, and I was a little too pissed to be social at the moment. So I stayed where I was and looked at Elaeya.

The doctor left. And Ylva peeked inside as he walked out.

She gasped. I looked up and saw her face paled, her eyes wide looking at a space above the bed.

Then I heard something, something that made my skin crawl.

— Ylva —

I'd rushed to the hospital as I'd gotten a call from Anders in a panic. Someone might have gotten to Elaeya. I've no idea how it could have been done without a fight. Only if it was an inside job.

I knew Kaden would ask for answers. I was bracing myself for it, but I'd been sleeping. My shift started at three in the morning. I knew nothing.

When I knocked at the door, no one came.

I would have normally barged in, but not on an angry Alpha.

I decided it might be better for me to wait.

I hadn't seen Kaden lose his shit very often, but when he did, it was not pretty.

When the doc slipped out, I decided to use this opportunity to take a peek.

The moment my hand touched the door as I stopped it from closing, I knew something was wrong. There was something in the air that was foul, an energy, stronger than I'd ever felt. One of absolute evil.

I know people and religious organisations like to throw that words around a lot. But generally, those that do so, have no idea what true evil his.

I carefully moved the door out of my way and looked in absolute horror at what was awaiting me.

The Other was here, in this room, on top of Elaeya. Its shape solider than ever. It's long spidery fingers that ended in crooked claws glided sensually inside little cuts in her skin. Then it raised the bloody claws to its head that split in two at the middle opening wide enough for the upper part of the head to misalign with the lower part, and a long purply triple tongue slithered out of its serrated rows of teeth to lick the blood in pure sexual ecstasy, shuddering in the most grotesque abomination of an orgasm.

It straddled her with its long limps, and it turned its jet-black head slowly to me. Its eyes connecting with mine as a knowing smile spread upon its wicked lipless face. The glossy black eyes digging at my flesh as it started to laugh demonically.

Kaden reacted first, Sam rose from his sitting position a second later. I don't know if they heard it, but they perceived something.

At that very moment, the Other taunted me, as it slid another claw inside another of Elaeya's wounds and brought the blood to its mouth once more. Sucking on it lasciviously.

"Ylva?" Kaden asked, clearly looking for the source of the disturbance.

He knew I could see things he couldn't.

At this moment, I had a flashback of seeing Elaeya wipe her blood away, and burn the evidence. She'd had been worried to leave blood behind.

Blood that an Other was enjoying.

There is no way in hell that I could fight an Other. No one here can fight them. But I promised I would protect Elaeya, that I'd protect my Alpha, my pack. And it came here because of me. It followed me. I'd seen it by the woods, looking at me, at us, when Elaeya and I went for a run. I thought it might have been interested in me. I thought I was protecting myself the best that I could. But when it had looked at us, it switched its target, I just never realized it.

I don't know what I could have done differently. But it didn't change the facts. It was killing Elaeya, and it was my fault.

I didn't think, I drew the sword on my back, sad that I still hadn't replaced my battle-axe that I broke during the fight in Ruthenia, and released my best battle cry as I charged the most impossible opponent I've ever fought.

— Chapter Thirty-Eight —

SOMETHING WAS WRONG

— Ylva —

There are things that aren't done. A single ant doesn't run towards an elephant screaming blooding murder with the hope of toppling it over. That ant is going to get squashed, bad. This is a truth that no one would dispute.

But for some reason, anything that has at least a little bit of human in them, seems to forget this fact quickly. It's like we can't accept our own position in the world, and keep wanting for more.

It's greed, and ambition, and hubris.

We are a bunch of Icarus, but whenever we see one crashing down, we tell ourselves, 'maybe if I modify the wings a little bit, it'll work'.

I knew what awaited me.

It knew me, it had seen me.

I'd opened a door I wasn't able to close.

I was probably doomed anyways.

I don't know what I could have achieved in this, but I knew one thing, I'll die fighting.

So bring it on, fucker!

I bounded in five long strides towards the Other, my sword above my head.

Kaden's eyes widened and he grabbed Elaeya by her midriff and pulled her off the bed to him. He struggled more than he should have, has the thing had a hand on her, holding her down, making her feel that much heavier. But he still got her out in a second, his muscles straining in confusion at the unexpected resistance.

The Other, let him, and kept looking at me, absolutely undisturbed. It smiled even wider, in pure amusement at my defiance.

It took me less than two seconds to reach it, my sword falling in a long arc.

Its arms were longer than my arms and sword combined, and it smacked me in the chest with a casual backhand slap.

The wind in my lungs—or whatever was left as I was still screaming—got pushed out in a 'wooph' and I went flying backwards, my feet not touching the ground, my limps clipping on random objects numbing them and knocking my sword off. I hit the wall with enough force for

the whole room to shake, the first level of drywall crumbled and the other one behind got dented, as metal pipes blocked me from going right through. The metal bent and I hit my head hard on one of the pipes.

My vision blurred for an instant, my skull painful. The world started spinning sideways and I whizzed, unable to take a full breath in.

It had swatted me as easily as I would've swatted a fly.

The nurse had cowered in a corner, looking at the scene in confusion.

Kaden couldn't see the thing and was looking around wildly, knowing something was there, but powerless to act. He's not a man that deals very well with feeling powerless.

Sam rushed to me and tried to help me up, but my legs were big useless noodles.

"What the hell is in here?" asked Kaden in a panic.

I tried to talk but could only cough feebly in between wheeze.

Sam dragged a chair to me—that I'd knocked over in my failed attack—and picked me up in his arms, to sit me on it.

I would have normally smacked the bejesus out of him for trying something like this, but I didn't find the strength in me to do so. The Other looked at me like a deranged child enjoying ripping wings off flies.

I thought for a moment it would come after me. It turned its body to me, lowered its head, and raised its claws. But it put one across its mouth and 'shushed' at me with its maniacal grin, the rubbery skin crackling like a dried-up corpse in the corners, its eyes deranged. Then it turned it chitinous body swiftly, grabbed Elaeya with one hand and dragged her back to the mattress like a ragged doll. Kaden unable to stop it—completely in shock.

When Kaden had shaken her out of the way of my attack, I'd seen her eyes flutter open, her mind in shambles.

Now, she tried clumsily to push at the things with her hands. No matter how hard she pushed or hit, nothing moved and it laughed.

This time I knew everyone heard it.

No one can be made aware of an Other without being aware first. It cannot manifest itself without being noticed. But that's not what had just happened. This meant that it was stronger. Stronger than anything I ever heard of. Something was wrong. And in a flash of insight I thought of the blood, the essence of life—there are a lot of things that use blood. I know it can also be used to cross portals and connect to the spirit world. Maybe this one had used it to gain a stronger footing in this world, as it was not from our realm of existence to begin with. It

couldn't make itself known at will, and most of all, it could not touch physically someone that couldn't perceive it.

So when Kaden tried to help Elaeya and the thing smacked him on the chest, I knew it was over. Kaden got pushed back a meter at least, but he lowered his body and let out one of is bigger growls.

The entire room shook, things clanked, and seeing at the expression on Kaden, Sam, and the nurse—for an instant there, the sonic vibration allowed them to see it, if only vaguely.

Kaden started to shift, is eyes yellowing, his teeth lengthening. Elaeya's claws were out, and she tried desperately to claw the thing's flesh out to no avail.

There were a few other strange attacks that she did that made me think of magic, one blew out a 'bang' and the other let out odd stinking smokes sizzling from the thing's skin, but nothing worked, and it just kept laughing at her, the voice sounded like maggots and rot, and it rose in pitch and madness.

"What is this?" Sam asked me, his wolf on the surface, ready to burst out and attack in turn.

I put my hands on the armrests and pulled myself up clumsily as the spinning subsided. "An Other," I said.

Elaeya's eyes snapped to mine for an instant in pure understanding.

Kaden moved for his attack but she stopped him.

"No," she said.

Sam had been ready to jump and shift, but he stopped in his tracks too.

"Stand back," she ordered the men.

I carried my carcass to where my sword was, and bent to grab it, holding myself on a table so that I would not lose my balance as the dizziness was not completely gone.

Kaden looked about to argue.

Sam was looking at his Alpha, waiting to know what to do.

Elaeya eyes changed colour to a sort of reflective whitish shimmer, the contours a dark shade of magenta. She pulled on one of the thing's arms to drag it closer. It clearly had the strength to fight her, but it complied in amusement. When it got close enough, its mouth opened in a chasm nearly as big as her whole head, rasping in horrifying gurgling. It's triple tongues slithering in thick saliva in all directions in anticipation.

She put both her hands on it chest and a light built up from the touch, bright and powerful.

The thing snapped its mouth shut in displeasure, grabbed her by the throat, the other hand on her belly, and pulled her up, slamming her against the wall, her head hitting the ceiling as it pushed her up further, using its massive height to its advantage.

Kaden attacked and he hit what he could only perceive as solid empty air between her and him.

“Back,” she rasped at him.

I rose to my full height with my sword in hand.

“How can it be fought?” Kaden asked in a growl.

“We can’t,” I said

The light from her hand was still growing, there was a sound that reminded me of the buzzing in your hear after you hear a sound that is too loud for too long, like tinnitus—only the sound was constantly rising in pitch, like a teakettle, only higher. The light kept growing still, painting the whole room in white. Such a light should have blinded us, but it didn’t, and in a flash of insight I realised that neither the light, nor the sound were perceived with our actual senses. Our eyes didn’t see white, our brain did.

I don’t know what kind of attack had the power to bypass all natural sensory perception, but I knew it bothered the Other to no end.

It kept pushing her up, her neck bent as her head was pressed on the ceiling, but she didn’t let go. It gurgled a sneered scream that sounding like back up sewage and dismemberment in the form of angry vocalisations. The claws on its right hand dug into the flesh on her belly, the blood gliding all the way to its hand and dripping on the floor, but she ignored this completely. Her focus solely on the Other, her mouth moving in what seemed like low chanting, the sound obstructed by the hand crushing her throat.

She was about to hit with all that she could.

Kaden came to rush the thing again, seeing her crushed like this, and bleeding—he could probably not see it holding her, just that she was floating and hurting. He was in a blood frenzy and wanted nothing more than to kill it, but he couldn’t get to her.

“Back off,” I told him, my hand on Sam’s chest, stopping him from pitching in.

I could feel an energy build and build. It had been maybe seven or eight seconds since the things started to attack her in earnest, but what she was aiming at it, felt like the complete opposite of what it was. As much as this thing screamed of death, this light felt like pure life. Whatever it was, scared the shit out of me.

The Other’s blackened eyes widened. The sclera as black as the iris, in big insectile globes.

And Elaeya released her attack with a cry.

The Other toppled over and fell on the ground, she on top.

Kaden flew forward to catch her but she shook her head at him.

He let her fall with difficulty as she landed on the thing. She barged her fists on its chest with tiny motes of light, remnants of what she had just released. I could see its silhouette shift with every punch, the men reacting, seeing it for a fraction of a second every time she connected with its ribcage.

It gurgled a skin crawling scream that made my ear literally bleed. All or our ears.

During that time, she began screaming herself, in pure rage and defiance, snapping her hands to its chest and pushing for all she had.

It spun its claws aiming at the flesh on her waist to rip her apart in a last ditch effort to protect itself from her.

Kaden couldn't stand by any longer. Evidently seeing enough of the thing to know what it was about to do.

She pushed further, the light building up again.

And everything exploded.

— Chapter Thirty-Nine —

I WON'T BE SORRY TO SEE IT BURN

— Kaden —

Elaeya was bleeding and screaming so hard, I could hear her voice break. The big black thing was wriggling on the floor and trying to attack her, interrupted every time she smacked her glowing hands on it.

I could only see it in flashes as the light connected with its chitin.

It was the ugliest thing I'd ever seen, and its stench was so powerful I could taste it on my tongue in suffocating disgust.

Elaeya, apparently, could see at as clearly as Ylva could.

I know nothing of what an Other is other than it's not from around here, and bad, really, really bad.

Ylva said we couldn't fight it, but apparently Elaeya could. I don't know what she was doing, but it had an effect. If that would be enough to save her was still left for debate though.

My skin had hardened, fur sprouting all over. My claws were extended, I was half-way shifted and I wanted to tear its flesh apart. I wanted to feel it's blood on my tongue, and rip its heart out of its chest.

Both Elaeya and Ylva told me to back out.

I wanted to trust them, I really did. But I was barely holding on to my sanity. I wanted violence, more than I ever remember wanting it. But whatever attack I would try would put her in harm's way, and I couldn't let that happen. This thought was the only thing holding me from going berserk.

I doubt there hasn't been a full half-minute past since Ylva came in the hospital room, but it felt like days.

Fights are this way. But this one was not my own, at least not yet, and I hated it.

I couldn't hold back the snarls that came out of my chest. The reverberations allowed me to see the thing clearer.

It was gathering itself for an attack. I had less than a second to move.

I could not hesitate.

I rushed forward, my arms wide, hoping that I could attack from the sides and spare Elaeya in between. I would probably hurt her, but maybe, just maybe I'd save her.

I felt my heart twist as I knew what was about to happen, what i was about to do.

During this time, she screamed her last, most heart-shattering cry. It was full of desperation, and anger, and madness.

Her hands went through its chest to hit the floor beneath.

I barely shifted my weight in time to move aside to not fall on her, but beside her instead. Sparing her from being a casualty of my attack, as the thing disappeared.

There was a concussion, not unlike that of a bomb, only the sound was subsonic, the air pressure nothing but an odd pulsating sensation on our skin, there was a split second where my senses were completely gone. I could see nothing, hear nothing, feel nothing, the stench of the thing was gone, I could smell no one or anything. I couldn't even tell if I was upright or falling upside down. And as quickly as this sensation hit me, I regain contact with reality, landing on all four next to Elaeya.

The Other wasn't there anymore.

Elaeya was kneeling on the floor, her hand holding her weight, her head bend forwards.

But the room was not the same. Nothing was the same.

The explosion didn't shatter the walls and ceiling. Instead, everything turned to rot.

The floor and every surface looked like it had been part of an abandoned building for more than a century. There was grime, brown, and dark green dried substances everywhere. The smell was that of decay. Our clothes were falling apart at the slightest movement, and had the same kind of fragility you'd see of any fabric retrieved through archeology. The colours faded. But the most significant thing was the symbols. Glyphs everywhere on the walls, floor and ceiling, etched in a language I did not know. They looked rough and ancient, and there was little space between them. They felt mysterious and intriguing.

"Don't read them," rasped Elaeya. "It will render you insane."

I saw Sam snap his eyes away from them, just as I did. Ylva put a hand on the chair to sit down, but it fell apart. The metal so rusted and thin it could not even hold its own weight, let alone Ylva's. She had her eyes closed. I wasn't sure if it was not to look at the symbols or to keep her from being sick. Could be from both.

"We need running water," Elaeya added. "Showers, at least an hour to keep us from being blighted, and quickly," she was rushing the words out as if she was worried she might not be able to do it later. "Anything in here stays in here, but our bodies. Even clothes. It all has to burn down. Fire will purify it. We need to leave now."

There was some commotion outside.

Elaeya tried to move but she faltered and I caught her as she fell.

There were massive bruises on her neck, and cuts everywhere on her. There was blood on her clothes, her breathing was laboured, the sweat glistening on her skin.

The door of the room flew open as my men made their appearance, attracted by the commotion of the attack.

Anders was at the door, with the rest of the team behind.

“NO!” screamed Elaeya with her damaged vocal cords. “Don’t step in.”

I raised my hand, palm up at them to reinforce what she said.

“They will be blighted too,” she whizzed barely able to talk now. “No one can enter here, we have to get out. Running water,” she muttered brokenly.

I took her in my arms and walked to the door. Sam helped put the nurse back on her feet.

Elaeya wasn’t moving much anymore. I looked at the nurse.

“I can wash her,” she told me. She indicated for the guys outside where to get bathrobes, we took the crumbling clothes off and wrapped ourselves in bathrobes. The fabric becoming more and more brittle the longer it stayed inside the room.

The nurse was the first to leave, strong enough to carry Elaeya to the showers. Sam followed.

I slammed my hand on the doorway before Ylva marched out, blocking her.

She really looked bad.

“You’re okay?” I asked her.

She looked away from me.

Something was wrong.

She never looks away.

“Ylva?” I asked menacingly.

“I’m sorry,” she said meekly.

What the hell?

“Has this anything to do with you?” my voice lowered dangerously.

“It followed me from Greysky. I never thought it would go for her. I was trying to protect myself. I never thought it could be interested in anyone else.”

“What?” I said carefully, my voice barely audible now.

"No one can fight Others. At least… I don't know… I'll do anything Kade… Please," she was begging me, like I'd never seen her beg. Her guilt clearly eating at her. But right now, I had no compassion left for her.

"You kept this from *me*," I said dangerously.

"Nothing could be done," she said her voice small.

"Of course it couldn't, because I didn't *know*," I let my words lash at her.

She recoiled.

"You didn't let me know. I could have tried *something*, but you took that option away from me, and Elaeya paid for your mistake," I growled. "You will set things straight. You will burn this room, and make sure it never comes back. You will make sure to find what can be done and you will do it. This is *your* mistake, correct it," I spat. "Am I making myself clear?"

"Yes," she inclined her head.

"Now go take your goddamn shower and get out of my face."

She slipped out in a hurry.

I left the room slamming the door close. The hinges cringed and the door half fell down, hanging drunkenly.

"Block this thing until we can deal with it," I told Anders. "And clear as much of this wing as it can be done."

I didn't even look at any of them.

I was seething.

I went to the showers wanting to rub my skin raw of all the muckiness from that bloody room.

I won't be sorry to see it burn.

— Chapter Forty —

ONE LONG ASS SHOWER

— Mishka —

I heard of the hospital incident fairly quickly.

I'm generally good at learning stuff, but I must say, rumours in a pack travels hella fast. I barely have to put in an effort.

I also found out the attack might have been coming from Ylva, and the Alpha was super angry at her. Which made no sense to me.

So I decided to go to the source.

I tracked Ylva in the showers of the hospital. She was sitting on the floor wet and naked. Her back was against the back wall, her right pressed on the sidewall, her knees up to her chest, and she stared at nothing without moving.

Droplets of water fell on her, but most of the falling water fell next to her.

"Go away," she said without looking at me, and without much emotion, just numbness.

I dropped on my shin and got closer.

The water was cold.

"What happened?" I asked her.

She said nothing.

"I heard something attacked the Luna."

"She's not Luna yet," she corrected me, emotionless.

"Elaeya," I corrected myself.

She said nothing.

"Who attacked?" I asked.

"An Other," she said, her voice braking at the end.

I took a breath in through my teeth. "It just left?"

"Elaeya beat it."

"Well, I'll be damned. She has some spunk."

She snorted but was still not looking at me.

“But it’s over now, right?”

“The nursed washed her, but the blight would not go away.”

“Blight?” I asked.

“The rot that Others infect people with. Running water was supposed to wash it away. She said it would. But it didn’t for her,” she said closing her eyes. “The nurse was worried. Kade will kill me for this.”

“Why would he do that?”

I went to pick a towel.

“Because it’s my fault,” she said tormented.

“How so?” I asked casually, returning to her shower stall.

“It followed me here?”

“Why? From where?” I bent back down.

“When we returned from Greysky and passed through the empty land. I spotted it. Once someone notices an Other, it allows it to connect with you, track you, follow you, attack you.”

“Sure, but people don’t see them.”

She shook her head. “Most can’t. But I’m part Valkyrie, which allows me to see them. And once I do they can see me back.”

I tried to wrap her in the towel, but she pushed it away.

“You’re cold Ylva. That’s not healthy.”

“I need to wash the blight away,” she said, her eyes still vaguely looking at nothing in particular.

“And how long to you intend to do that?”

“One hour, she said one hour.”

I scolded thinking. “It’s been more than an hour Ylva.”

She looked at me, then at her nail. They were dark. I thought at first it might have been the cold, but now I was beginning to think differently.

“You’re blightening,” I said.

She shrugged and put her hand back down, wrapping her arms tighter around her and letting her head fall sideways against the wall.

I got back up, turned the temperature of the water up, and moved the shower head for the water to fall right on top of her.

“If you’re thinking you doing some self-punishment here, you’re wrong,” I told her, my voice colder. “Get your shit together. Shit happens. It followed you, now it’s gone. Letting yourself fall apart is not gonna change what happened.”

“This is none of your fucking business,” she said angrily, wiping the water off her face along with her plastered blond hair. She looked at me with bloody murder in her eyes.

“This is better,” I told her.

I grabbed soap and shampoo, kicked my shoes off which were already getting wet, then bent back down, landing on my shin in front of her. I extended my arms to give her the soap and bottle.

“You’ll do it or do I have to do it.”

She snorted angrily at me, but took them both.

I nodded satisfied.

“It’s not the end of the world,” I told her, looking at some really angry bruises on her skin. “You survived, everyone survived.”

“She might not,” she told me.

“How so?”

“Blight, when it’s well settled in, it only worsened.” She kept the soap and shampoo in her hands, but didn’t wash. She looked down at the tiled floor. Rivulets of water gathered to the drain in a slow spiral.

I never saw her like this.

“Maybe something can be done about this.”

“How,” she pleaded. “Kaden told me to take care of the situation. To make sure it can’t return. It could return.”

“Didn’t you say she defeated it.”

“Yes, but it’s not dead. Just licking its wounds. Other can’t be killed. They’re immortal.”

“I’m sure there are ways around.”

“How?” said asked now looking in my eyes in earnest. “I’m the one who’s supposed to correct this, but I don’t know of a way. I didn’t even think Elaeya could stop it.”

I nodded. “I know a guy. I can call him. He’ll sort it out.”

She raised her brows in disbelief.

“Let me handle this part. But you have to take care of yourself.” I took one of her hands in mine, and rubbed soap on it, washing it thoroughly under the water, trying to wash away the blight that was trying to set root in her fingers.

She said nothing. I kept my eyes on her hand.

My clothes were getting seriously wet.

I moved to her other hand, massaging it under the water, both in silence.

“I thought I had lost it,” she broke the silence after a few minutes. “I hadn’t seen it since I had boarded the plane. I ignored it, made sure it would not notice too much that I’d noticed it. I didn’t think it would try anything with anyone else.” She took a long breath, her posture getting slightly straighter and closer to what I was used to seeing in her.

“Yesterday morning, I saw it here. Lurking in between the trees. Elaeya and I were running. It looked at me. I know it did,” she told me. “I didn’t let Elaeya look at it. I got out of there before anything could happen. But it didn’t attack, so I thought I might have tricked it again in not being sure if I’d seen it or not. I never thought it took notice of her. I never thought she could really see it either.”

I listened.

Once I was done with her hands, I moved her feet slightly to better wash them too, but letting her hide her body behind her bent legs.

“It drank some of her blood. I don’t know what it means, but I think it somehow made it stronger. It was a lot stronger than it should have been. It could make itself known.”

I felt my brown constrict together at her words.

It didn’t sound good, at all.

Once I was done with her feet, I gave her the soap bar.

“You want me to deal with the rest of you or you can do that yourself?”

She scoffed at me and grabbed the soap roughly from my hands.

“You want me to leave?”

She said nothing and just looked at the soap bar in her hand.

My legs were becoming painful for staying in that position for so long. As I heard no objections I dropped my ass on the tiles in a puddle of water right next to her, our bodies pressed against one another in the little cramped space.

“What do you think you’re doing?” she asked me, looking sideways.

“My legs hurt,” I said. “And I’m wet.”

Part of the water was now falling straight on me.

“So you decided to get more wet?”

I shrugged.

“We’ll deal with all this,” I told her. I knew she understood what I meant.

She said nothing.

“I’ll help.” I looked at my watch. “Forty-five minutes to go.”

“Are you going to stay here all that time?”

I shrugged.

“This is gonna be one long ass shower,” she said.

“You’re welcome.”

— Chapter Forty-One —

WHAT HAS THIS ASSHOLE WEREWOLF GOTTEN ME INTO?

— Alik —

I was sitting in an expensive SUV with a guy I hadn't seen in a while.

"It's hard to believe you finally joined a pack," I told him.

"You know me. I'm full of surprises," he said cheekily.

I snorted. "Not always the best surprises," I said.

We both fell back to silence.

He told me everything he knew about a situation with an Other.

A fucking Other.

Fuck my life.

I did not want to be dragged in Others business, but I trusted the guy. He was a massive asshat, but we face shit together a couple of times. He said it was important. I believed him. Plus I kinda owed him.

I wasn't sure exactly where we were. It looked pretty isolated.

The kind of place to make you nervous to ride in with a monster.

But again, monster business is often part of my job.

The security on that territory is impressive though.

There was a massive amount of check points and inspections. More than once Mishka had to vouch for me.

Eventually, we drove to a pretty good size town.

Mishka knocked on a door in a hospital. The wing we were in looked pretty deserted, but very well kept and luxurious.

It looked more like a TV show hospital than an actual hospital. The nurse's desks were not MDF but hard quality wood, the computers less than two years old. Even the chairs in the waiting room we passed by, looked comfortable.

Mishka looked like he was waiting for something, listening, then opened the door. I heard nothing, but then again, there could have well been an answer that I didn't hear. I don't have

superhuman hearing. This is the downside of being human in a world of preternatural creatures.

Mishka peeked inside.

“I have someone here who can help,” he said to the room.

“How?” asked a deep male voice.

“Wizard,” was his explanation.

Wait, wasn’t I expected? Is he improvising this shit?

Motherfucker, what is he getting me involved in?

The person in the room was silent for a little while.

There are a lot of monsters out there that are really uncomfortable with humans that dabbles in magic. It generally comes down to two things. Either it’s because they see humans as cattle and anything that could change that power dynamic, like magic, is sneered at, at best—it does allow humans to step out of that victim role and deal with the supernatural crowd on a near equal footing, which a lot of monsters don’t like.

The other reason is predominantly that magic is icky to some. It’s devious, hard to predict, and fight against. It’s not infallible tough, and it makes no one invulnerable. It takes a long time to master—at least for humans—and can be unstable and hard to control. But when you face someone prepared, someone experienced, someone with a vast well of energy to tap into, then it can make a lot of scary things want to wet their skivvies.

I mean, I don’t have claws, or superhuman strength, or super hearing, but I can do a lot of incredible things with magic. I can set stuff on fire with my mind, walk through the borders of worlds, bring forth illusions, or communicate across space in an instant—though that last one is less impressive since the arrival of telecommunication. But I still think it’s pretty cool.

I’ve been trained since I was a child in the arts, and I’ve always loved it.

No matter what disaster it could get me involved in, in the end, I still found magic pretty awesome.

But then again, I’m a massive nerd. Magic is just my outlet. Some get into Star Wars, or Anime, or D&D, but I can summon actual demons. So take that common nerds. I don’t just geek out on fantasy, I live it.

Now, today, my nerdiness made me a little uncomfortable, because it got me involved in some shit again. I was sure of it.

“I trust him,” said Mishka to the stranger on the other side. “I think he can deal with this, protect her.”

Protect?

Wasn't I supposed to look at the aftermath of a battle with an outsider, heal a victim, ward the place from further incursions, and that's that?

I was never told of protecting anyone.

"I vouch for him," said Mishka. "If everything works out fine, give the credit to Ylva. If it doesn't work you can blame me."

I don't know if the one inside the room said something as I still heard nothing—maybe he communicated in sign language—but Mishka moved aside to let me in.

The room was bright, but not too bright. It was painted in the pastel version of a dandelion, all yellow and sunshine. There were long white curtains on the window that didn't block all the light away, but made it easier on the eyes of someone resting. The wind blew through the open windows making the drapes dance gently.

Sitting on the other side of a hospital bed was a man. He was probably the tallest man I've seen outside of an NBA match. Even sitting down, I could guess his height at around six-nine. Very muscular, but not enough to lose flexibility and agility. Dark hair, eyes, tanned skin, and he was looking at me very intently.

Mishka closed the door behind us and stood by it, like a soldier.

Oh, I see, he vouches for me, but he's still standing guard there to kick my ass if I mess up.

I looked at the man again.

Maybe Mishka didn't do it out of suspicion on me, but to make that man feel better about having me here. Or not. What do I know?

I looked at the source of the worries lying on the bed.

She had a milky complexion, pale hair, and she was sleeping. And she was extremely pretty.

It took me maybe three seconds to realize had stopped breathing. I knitted my brows and looked more carefully at her.

What little sunlight reached her skin, shone with a glow. It made me think how painted lines on asphalt roads reflect the headlights of cars better than regular paint. It wasn't actually shining, but it reacted to light differently than a normal human's skin.

I took a few steps in her direction.

The guard dog on the other side of the bed gave me a warning look.

I didn't let it affect me.

Rule number one with monsters, don't let them see you sweat.

And yeah, I was pretty sure he was of the monster variety. My guess, given that we were on a werewolf pack, was obviously werewolf, but he gave me a dangerous vibe. I felt light prickling on my skin—his aura of power. I would guess he had rank, or had the strength for it.

She, on the other hand, I wasn't sure.

Werewolves looks very human until they shift, or at the very least let their wolfish nature come to the surface.

But she looked different.

I showed my hands palms up to him. No weapons, see? And tried to pacify him with what looked like a non-threatening stance, so that I could take a better look. Granted it had limited effect, anyone who knows a little about wizards knows that it's not empty hands that would stop them from doing some pretty badass magic.

"I can't say or do anything without a look," I told him.

"You do anything, it'll take you years to die," he said impassively, but his eyes had nothing with impassivity in them, they bore into me like jackhammers.

"You can't hold me, not for long," I told him pointedly. Wizards are pretty infamous for being tough prisoners. "And I will have to do things if you want me to help her."

He looked at Mishka behind me, then back at me.

He let his back connect with the chair's backrest, but kept looking at me very carefully.

I suppose that was all the support I was going to get.

So I got closer, careful not to make any sudden move so that I wouldn't trigger anything unpleasant, like attempted disembowelment, and took a better look at her.

With the light, I could have thought her hair was platinum blond, but as I took a better look I realized it was pure white.

"What is she?" I asked him.

"Nothing of your concern," he told me.

I had a pretty good idea in what region we were, and what packs were around there. I also knew Mishka is not the type to bend down to many people—probably only the toughest motherfucker would get him to behave. There was, in all likelihood, only one pack in the region that would be a plausible option to make him forgo his lone wolf ways.

"What has your Alpha to say about her?" I taunted him.

"I'm the Alpha."

Oh, fuck me!

I looked down at the young woman lying there.

I saw something that caught my eye.

I extended my hand.

He looked about to rip my face off. I gave him a look. He let me, but kept his eyes on my every move.

I picked up a strand of her hair and raised it up to the light.

It was long, very long. And the tip went from pink darkening all the way to black.

Oh, fuck me sideways and backwards!

What has this fucking asshole werewolf gotten me into?

— Chapter Forty-Two —

I WILL TAKE ALL THE FIRE POWER I CAN GET

— Alik —

"You're the bloody fucking Hellhound," I told him.

"I am," he said, looking carefully at me as I held the hair strand in my hand.

"And she's a vitteraï."

He said nothing, but was unsurprised.

"And you know," I looked at the unconscious woman. "Who is she to you?"

"My mate."

"She's part werewolf?" I asked.

He looked carefully at me but said nothing still.

She clearly was. She couldn't be his mate if she wasn't.

I did some quick math. "She's something else too?" I asked the Hellhound.

He looked at me calculating. He was not ready to share information about her easily. Given what she was, it was understandable, I would shut my mouth too if I was close to a vitteraï.

I turned around, grabbed a plushy chair by the backrest and dragged it next to her bed to sit my ass on it, looking at the Hellhound straight in the eyes from across the bed.

I crossed my legs, swinging my feet to a rhythm in my head.

"What are you doing?" he asked me.

"I can't do shit without all the information," I said. "You see, some things I could do, could possibly cause an allergic reaction and kill her."

"Werewolves can't be allergic."

"Not to regular allergens, no, but there are other things that could do this," I explained. "There are other things that could attack the blight, but hurt her in the process, not making a difference between her in the blight."

"And why would you do that?" he asked dangerously.

"I would not want that, but things react differently to different preternatural beings. If I don't know what she is, I can't tell what can help or hurt her."

I laid my arms casually on the armrests.

"Let me start with what I know," I said. "She's a hybrid—vitteraï, what you guys call spirit wolf, and werewolf, she wouldn't be your mate if she wasn't."

He tilted his head. "That makes no sense," he told me.

"It makes plenty of sense," I retorted.

"I know of werewolves with humans."

I smiled. "Yes and no. The natural mate bond that werewolves experiences can only occur between werewolf, which means that those humans you know, maybe five generations back, maybe ten, but somewhere in there, there was a werewolf, it's just that the blood is too diluted for you to notice it."

"Always?"

"Always," I concurred. "Vitteraï can have a similar mate system to werewolves, but it's triggered through a ceremony that requires the blood of seven possible mates at a minimum, all males, to connect with the female, and it doesn't have to be vitteraï either. Then the bond grows until the male sense it and goes to her. But vitteraï are pretty rare these days, and that ceremony is done by one of their shamans, only they're not so fond of hybrids. I doubt they would have done her a favour. They could see she's a hybrid by her hair, if not by her smell. Which again means werewolf.

Only werewolves don't have what it takes to fight an Other, and though I'm not sure about vitteraï, I doubt it. Hence, there is something else into the mix. My guess is either deity, high-ranking sidhe, guardian spirit, or human practitioners. There could be a few other options, but those are in all likelihood, the most probable."

He looked at me for a few seconds, then nodded. "Witch."

"No," I said.

He raised his brows at me.

I raised my hands in compliance. "Maybe the originator was a witch, but she's not," I explained.

"How so?" he asked.

"Magic is like a receding gene in humans. One parent must have it. Not everyone develops it, sometimes it lies dormant for a while, or the person is only a carrier, but there is no guaranty a child will develop magic or not. Although there is a statistical correlation between power and abilities versus inheritance.

The more powerful the parent, or if both parents have it, the higher the probabilities of the child developing magic are."

"Okay, so having a decedent being a witch doesn't necessarily make a witch, but I'm pretty sure I've seen her do magic," he told me. "So witch."

I shook my head. "Not everyone develops magic the same way. Witches don't necessarily breed witches. She's had to be at least a sorceress if not wizard to be able to banish an Other."

"Aren't the different titles just pretension?"

I put my hand on my heart. "You're hurting my feelings." I didn't put much acting in it. "And no. There are different types of practitioners, though some of the lower practitioners are good at what they do, they're limited—they generally have little more than one level of expertize—pyromancers, ectomancer, precogs, and so on. When they start to diversify their skill set, you have witches. Crank it up a bit and you get sorcerers. If properly trained, they're pretty hard to beat in a lot of spheres of magic, but they'll struggle to combine different expertise, and will probably not be able to do something at the opposite spectrum of what they're good at. Wizards can do it all, with enough training and practice."

"I thought wizard was male only," he said.

"Nope. Though I can't say there hasn't been some misogyny in the past. Women are called wizard too, just like there are men witches."

"Huh," he said thoughtfully. "So she's not just a witch?"

"Nope. Need more than that to work at the fabric of reality itself."

"What?"

"That's the best way to banish an Other. They're not from here, so you need to work on the borders of reality to send them back which requires tremendous amount of power to do that. Hence why I suggested gods, high sidhes, and so on, there aren't that many things with the juice to do it."

"But human practitioners can?" He was looking incredulously at me.

I smiled. "Humans are from this reality, a lot more than anything supernatural. It gives us an advantage. This is our turf. If you use this, combined with skills and power, then a human can do what a minor deity would struggle to. Others are too alien to this reality, we just exploit this weakness better than your average supernatural crowd."

He nodded and looked at her. "Can you heal her now?"

"I can." I turned my head around at Mishka. "I need my bag in the truck, and my staff."

Mishka blinked at me. I felt the Hellhound shift uncomfortably at the mention of my staff. Let's just say that a wizard's staff is his most versatile and deadly tool. A wizard walking around with his staff is like rolling down the street with a tank. It's intimidating, dangerous, and a blatant affront to everyone around.

“If it comes back,” I said turning to the Hellhound. “I want all the protection I can get. I don’t want to end that fight in the same position as her,” I told him.

“Comes back?”

“Sooner or later, as long as she’s blighted, there is a link between them, it can use it to track her. Mishka said it drank of her blood. Vitteraï blood is seriously potent. It’ll want more. It could give it some level of footing in our reality. That would be really bad. We need to shatter the connection, all connections between then. But once I start to work, if it senses it, and has had enough time to heal some from their previous fight, then it’ll come for her, guaranteed,” I said. “I will take all the fire power I can get.”

— Chapter Forty-Three —

I'M A STUBBORN MOTHERFUCKER

— Alik —

The Hellhound nodded at Mishka, who opened the door and talked to someone, and threw the car keys, sending them for the errant.

"I need to see all the wounds it inflicted and where the blight as settled," I said.

The Hellhound rose from his chair along with me and took some of the blankets off of her, then rolled her sleeves, and raise her pyjama shirt off her midriff to show her stomach. Most of the wound had been bandaged.

"We will have to take the bandages off."

He nodded at Mishka again, who opened the door and said something to a nurse who came in an instant later.

It took maybe a minute, and two nurses were taking off all the bandages and showing me the wounds, then the blighted areas. It was on the fingers and toes, which are generally some of the first places for it to settle. Around the wounds, which is one of the best ways for blight to get in, but also inside her mouth, on the inside part of her lips, a bit on her gum and tongue, which was a lot more worrisome.

When the once-over was done, my stuff was brought in.

They gave me my bag but hesitated with my staff.

"Put it in the corner there, if it makes you feel more comfortable," I told the man.

He looked at his Alpha who nodded, then put my staff in the corner and left.

I pulled one of those hospital's rolling bed table closer, dumped my bag on the chair I had been sitting in, and started to pull stuff out and onto the table.

All of them were looking curiously at what I was doing.

"Does she need to be plugged up on the machine?" I asked.

"It's precautions mostly," said one of the nurses. They had both stepped aside and were waiting for orders. It was a good idea to keep the nurses in here, in case anything happened.

"We will have to unplug her for a little while and pull the bed off the wall," I told them.

The nursed looked at their Alpha who nodded, then complied.

I get that there must be days when this level of discipline and obedience must be useful. Though, I'm not sure I'd ever get used to something like that.

"Why?" asked the Hellhound.

"To make a circle around the bed," I said. "It's better if nothing crosses the circle, that includes wires."

He nodded. "Why a circle?"

He wasn't being obstreperous with his questioned and mostly just looked like someone genuinely curious.

And I love to talk about magic, I could go on for hours, so I didn't really mind.

"Circles are used to focus magical energy. They make it easier to concentrate it. Plus I can use it as a tool to make it harder for the Other to notice what I'm doing. If I'm really careful and we're lucky, it won't see a thing and we'll be in the clear."

"If not?"

"If not then it's going to suck for us. There will be a fight and it'll be bad."

He sighed. "Is there any other way?"

"Not with the time limit we have. The blight is getting internal. She doesn't have a lot of option time-wise before it is irreversible."

"How long?" he asked looking at her worryingly.

"I'd say somewhere between twelve hours to a couple of days. Setting traps and wards solid enough to block an Other that as a link to her will take us much longer than this."

My little table was getting crowded.

"Is it possible to have a few more like these?" I asked pointing at the table.

One of the nurses left instantly.

I must say, there are days when it's nice to have people at your beck and call.

It didn't take long until I had a full set up on six rolling table. Three long, two wide, which gave me a great working surface.

I had taken a few burners out and placed my ingredients in vials.

Every time I asked if I could get something, someone would go and fetch it instantly. If I asked for something not available in the hospital, someone that I didn't even see would go and fetch it in town. I must say, this town is not doing too bad in the magical ingredients department. And no matter how costly what I asked for was, not a single objection was emitted.

I guess it's nice to have lots of money too.

I answered more questions about what I was doing, which was one potion for her to drink, and a salve to put on the wounds.

Once the two burners were cooking their respecting mixture. I took a big black non-permanent marker, and did a big circle around her bed.

I got up and looked around to make sure it was round enough, and once satisfied, I went down on my knees and started to scribble markings.

I put one of the nurses in charge of watching the mixture to tell me when they would reach certain stages. Then I'd get up, did the next steps required, told her new instructions and went back to my scribbling.

Once I was done, I did a second circle around the first with the markings in between. Once that was done, I did a second row of markings. The first had been of healing, the second of protection. Once those were done—occasionally intersected by working on the cooking blends—I did a third circle, then started scribbling symbols of warding.

It took me hours.

I wanted to be sure I was doing it right. I just needed to mess it up once to make it all fall apart.

During that time, one of the nurses would stay within the circle, looking at the girl's vitals every few minutes, checking the wounds and progression of the blight.

It was not increasing as quickly as I could have, but it could have progressed slower too.

If my calculations were correct she had less than twenty-four hours, well eighteen now, I thought as I got up on my feet once the last circle around the third ring of symbols was finally done.

My knees were painful.

Someone rolled in a table full of food, and my stomach gurgled loudly.

There was a rotation of nurses to look at the girl, giving a break to the one that was doing it. We had to be careful not to damage my circles as we got her out of there.

It took a little contorting, but we managed.

Then Mishka, the Hellhound and I went to the sofas to stuff our face.

I was starving, and doing two concoctions at once, plus that circle had been demanding magically speaking, and I welcomed the break.

At first, we ate in silence. It had been awhile since I'd had a meal with such a strange combination of compatriots. I still had difficulty imagining Mishka dropping out the merc business. He had always seemed to thrive on it.

The Hellhound, on the other hand, I had no idea what to think of him yet.

We kept the chitchat to a minimum after that. As the day was well underway and we needed to get it all done before nightfall, or it could be an additional risk that we could not afford. And waiting for tomorrow would cut things really short, if anything went wrong and there were delays, we could find ouselves out of time for her.

Once the potion and salve were done, I instructed the nurses on how to use them and to do so once I was done, and every hour until they reached the end of the supply, which should last around three days, give or take.

Then I took my bag of spirit dust, walked next to the circle and prepared for one of the most complex summoning I would ever do. Because I would not be summoning some creature, as I was summoning something vaguer and more abstract. I would gather energy, magic, life force, and reality in a big ball, infuse it in spirit dust and bath her in it.

We cleared the room of all none essentials, cleared the tables too, and all furniture that could be in the way, in case of an attack, or anything that could go wrong.

I had a ceremonial obsidian knife that I lend the Hellhound.

“Break it and I’ll be really pissed,” I told him.

It was a genuine article, really hard to find, historical, and it had been used in magic ceremonies for centuries by all sorts of wizards. The kind of magic it had absorbed throughout its existence was significant. It could give him an edge if the Other attacked. Giving him a chance to do something.

That simple gesture seemed to have made a big difference with him.

He took the dagger carefully, nodded his thanks and put himself into position.

Two nurses were still on standby by my orders, just in case.

“What is her name?” I asked.

“Elaeya,” said the Hellhound.

I might as well know whose life was in my hands.

I walked to the circle and began my chanting. It was a long one, the syllables rolling on my tongue with a familiarity. Sweat pearled on my forehead as I concentrated, making sure to control the energy very carefully, moving it slowly so that no magical movement was too brusque and would attract the Other’s attention.

Has the pitch of the chanting rose, I kept my voice as low as I could, as if I was trying to whisper screams.

The words found their cadence. I felt the movement of the energy on my skin, my mind-eye looking at the colours of magic, shifting them delicately. I thought I saw a black rip on the corner of my eye, but if I faltered now to focus on it, it could be disastrous, it was like playing with nuclear fission, you don't do it carelessly or you risk another Chernobyl, and Elaeya would be ground zero.

Not only wasn't I fond of that idea, but I'm sure the Hellhound would not be very kind to me after such a fuckup. If I survived it, that is.

I really, really hoped it was not what I was thinking it was.

I kept my eyes on the ball, in this case quite literally as I was rolling everything I'd gathered in a gigantic ball of multicoloured energy.

The others in the room were probably not seeing anything, as it took quite a lot of skills and practice to learn to see magic.

I saw it again, in my peripheral, something long and black, maybe a foot long.

I threw the spirit dust—which had for main ingredient crystal dust—in a wide arc above her. The energy infused it and then I released it, letting it fall on her in a multicolour shimmering rain. It's not always that I get to do magic this beautiful. And that part, I knew they could all see.

I heard one of the nurses utters a reverend 'wow'.

Once it had properly settled on her, I jump inside the circle next to her, raised my right hand, the one than summons energy and with an uttered word, my staff flew from its corner and into my hand. I turned on the dark rip where a long crooked clawed hand was crawling out of. I slammed the bottom of my staff on the floor and a ringing 'thud', raised my left hand, the one for protection, and dug inside the workings on the circles for protection and warding. Using it to my advantage. I pointed the tip of my staff at the arm, out all the way to the shoulder now, and screamed in defiance, putting all the energy I had left in it.

When it hit, I saw in my peripheral the other shift around. They could see it now. Good.

Before I had the time to push harder. The Hellhound was already there, swiped the dagger at the arm and severed it right under the elbow.

Damn!

That worked even better than I thought it would.

The Other recoiled in pain.

The Hellhound grabbed the arm with his bare hand—which was probably a really bad idea—and threw the limb back inside the tear.

I used this instant, when nothing was blocking me, to put all my energy into closing the rift.

It took more out of me that I would have wanted. The Other pulling it wider with its sheer will. But I'm a stubborn motherfucker and I didn't let go.

It went inch by inch, but goddamnit I closed the damn thing.

Once it was over, I just crumbled on my ass in pure exhaustion.

"Done?" the Hellhound asked.

"Done," I said.

"He waved his hand at the nurses and they came to put the salves on Elaeya's wounds and used a little blue sponge on a plastic stick, dipped it in the potion, and put it inside her mouth to give her the first dose progressively as she was still unconscious.

The Hellhound marched to me, flipped casually the knife in the air, catching it by the blade and presented it to me, hilt first.

I nodded my thanks and took it, and wrapped it inside a blessed handkerchief. I'm going to have to purify it later.

"Now we have to treat your hand or you're going to be next on that bed," I told him.

He looked at the hand that had grabbed the severed limb, the skin had little darkened patches.

Damn this is going to be a long night, I thought, using my staff to pull my ass off the floor.

— Chapter Forty-Four --

OUR HOME

— Kaden —

I was sitting next to Elaeya's bed. Her skin tone was a little better, and it was back to its creamy white instead of the previous corpse grey complexion of the last few days. In less than fifteen hours the blight was all gone, the wounds were closing. And though the wizard wasn't sure if the wound would scar or not—as wounds by Others were a lot worse than your average cuts-when the doctor checked her this morning, he did confirm that if there would be scarring, it would be kept to a minimum. All the bruises that she had sustained from the attack were gone and it seemed her healing speed was reaching the norm for a werewolf.

I'm going to have to give Mishka a raise.

Bringing that wizard in was the best thing that could have been done.

After he treated my hand and finished up, he had been so exhausted that the guy could barely walk and Mishka had to half carry him to the packhouse. He'd been sleeping since.

Mishka said the wizard could also ward the place against any future Other incursions. So the moment he's up, we're going to plan for this. Actually, there are a lot of things that could be explored and I will have to have to talk with him later about it.

I've had a few practitioners around Blakeden and I do have a trio of woodswitches who lives at the bottom of the mountain. I've consulted them more than once. But yesterday has taught me that there are aspects of magic I've been neglecting for far too long. Werewolves can be hell on wheels in a fight, especially with a pack. But we are limited in so many other ways. The supernatural world is vast and complex and Blakemore has been too involved in so many ways, not to plan accordingly.

Some things will have to change.

Elaeya stirred.

The wizard warned me that she would be excessively tired for a few days to a week and to let her sleep, she needed it to heal.

Her eyes fluttered and she looked around a little confused.

"Hey there," I said as I got closer to her bed.

"Mmmm," she said feebly.

I picked a water bottle that was by the side table. "Are you up for a drink?"

“Mmm,” she acquiesced.

I tried not to be overly worried by the fact she wasn’t talking yet. I’ve been enough time in hospital beds myself—healing from injuries—to know the first waking in the aftermath is pretty jarring.

Regardless, I still felt my gut twist uncomfortably.

“Can you handle this?” I asked her as I brought the squirt bottle to her lips. The nurses had left a cup of water with the little sponge on a stick in case she had problems drinking. We didn’t know the extend of the internal damage to her throat. Swallowing could be possibly really painful.

She nodded to me the slightest and I gave her a little bit, let her swallow tentatively and then take another, and another.

I could see her eyes becoming more awake. After a few times, she reached for the bottle to continue herself.

All good signs.

“How long was I out?” she finally asked me. Her voice was a little hoarse and fragile, but it was a great improvement from the last time I heard her talk.

“A couple of days,” I said. “You woke a few times but only briefly.”

I moved a few strands of hair that was plastered on her forehead.

“How are you feeling?” I asked.

“I’ve been better,” she admitted with a sad smile. “But okay, I think.” She took a long inspiration then let it out slowly, closing her eyes in the process. “Getting there.” She looked at me. “You don’t look so good.”

“I haven’t slept much in a while,” I admitted.

She slipped her hand from under the covers and pressed it against my cheek gently.

“You should take better care of yourself,” she told me.

I leaned into her touch.

“I will,” I promised.

She blinked a few times.

“I missed my parents’ calls,” she said suddenly concerned. “They will be very worried.”

“I talked to them,” I said taking her hand in between mines.

She nodded. “They will come, you know. They just need a bit of time. Maybe a month, maybe three, but ultimately, they will come.”

I smiled. “They are,” I told her. “Your mother had some sort of dream and she called thinking you had been injured. When I said you had, they said they were coming, so I organized transportation for them.”

She nodded, unsurprised. “When?”

“Not too long. They had to cross the border so that we could pick them up in a country where it would be easier for me to deal with the fact that they have no papers. But I sent a team to make sure nothing bad happens.”

She nodded. “Thank you.”

I kissed each of her fingers one by one on the hand I was still holding.

She gave me a simper.

We had breakfast not long after. She was able to sit upright, which was very encouraging. She yawned soon after we ate and I helped her settle for bed once more. I drew the thicker, light blocking curtains over the windows, yawning too.

“You need to sleep too,” she told me.

“I don’t think I’ll be able to for a while,” I said.

She scooted a little aside on her hospital bed. That had me grinning.

“That his gonna be tight,” I said.

She frowned looking down at the bed.

“But we can manage,” I said sitting next to her.

I helped her move to her side which gave me a little more space to cuddle behind her. I put one arm under her head and the other around her waist, and it wasn’t long after that, that we both fell asleep.

* * * * *

I stirred as I felt something flutter on my arm.

I blinked my eyes blearily in confusion.

My mother was next to the bed and was putting blankets on top of Elaeya and me—as I’d been sleeping on top of hers.

“Hey, I didn’t want to wake you,” she muttered.

I grunted.

"Just go back to sleep."

It felt like a great idea, actually.

But my phone thought differently as it rang.

My mother extended her hand. "Give me that."

"I can take it," I grumble.

"You sleep," she ordered me. "I can handle whatever this is."

I decided against arguing, so I just took my cell from my back pocket and slipped it to my mother without looking at the screen.

She spotted Elaeya's phone on the side table and took it too, then slipped out. So I just dropped my head back down and let Elaeya scent lull me back to sleep.

* * * * *

I woke up again after what felt like too little time, only the light had changed.

Someone lit one of the lamps in the lounge section, but the rest of the room was bathed in the obscurity of night.

I raised my head blearily and rubbed at my eyes with my thumb and forefinger.

There were people walking in the room.

My father was the one who had turned on the lamp, my mother was at the door, and there were people behind her.

She shushed at me pointing at Elaeya.

I nodded.

A striking woman with long white hair walked in after her. Her skin was as pale as Elaeya's, but her eyes were a paler shade of pink. She looked very intently at us.

Maybe that was not the best position to meet the in-laws.

Granted, I had no idea they were here—given that I didn't have my phone.

I tried to get up without waking Elaeya. My Mom rushed trying to stop me altogether.

"You can sleep more," she whispered.

"I'm not going to sleep now," I said equally quietly.

Elaeya's mother came closer to look at her daughter, and behind her was a man, tall, black hair, with a darker skin tone that could be from any continent. And he was in a wheelchair, but that was not the most noticeable thing about him.

It was the scars. He was covered in them.

Some were faint, whereas others were deep keloid. They were on his arms, neck and face and probably covered the rest of his body too. Elaeya had told me what had happened to him, but seeing it made it feel far more brutal than anything I imagined.

I slipped my arm gently from under Elaeya's head.

"You've barely slept at all," my mother complained.

"I'm fine," I said.

I noticed in the wan light than her mother also had scars of her own. They were mostly faint white lines more apparent when the light hit sideways, reflecting it differently than the rest of her skin.

I slowly got up, trying to make a better first impression.

I was painfully aware that her parent had not approved of me from the get go, especially her mother. And now that they saw her again, she had been seriously injured while in my care. I was not pleading my case very well and I needed everything I could get.

I nodded at them and moved to the lounge area, giving them some alone time with their daughter.

My parents joined me.

"How long have they been here?" I asked them. It was pointless to try to hide that conversation, their hearing was probably as good as mine and they would hear everything regardless.

"A few hours," said my mother.

"You could have told me sooner."

"You need sleep too. Everything was under control."

"Have the accommodations—?" I began.

"They've settled, took a quick shower and changed clothes. I had one of the drawing rooms on the first floor of the packhouse converted to a bedroom to accommodate for the wheelchair, but they didn't want to wait too much before coming here."

I nodded. I didn't know about the wheelchair, so I didn't plan for it, but everything seemed dealt with.

I felt Elaeya stir before I heard her. I turned to look while my mother took her phone out.

It took Elaeya maybe a few seconds to wake and sort out who were in front of her. They exchanged a few words quickly followed by hugs.

A few minutes later someone knocked on the door.

My mother told us to get a few lights on and went to answer. A few carts of food were pulled in by hospital staff.

“Isn’t it a little early for steak?” asked my father, referring to Elaeya’s health.

“I’m okay,” she said now sitting on the side of her bed.

It was clearly my mother’s plan, and within a few minutes they were all on chairs near Elaeya’s bed eating on the hospital rolling tables.

I sat next to her on the bed, on the same small table.

There was some awkwardness, but my mother declared herself entertainer of the evening and did stunningly, as usual.

After our dinner, both our father stroke a conversation and got going for a while. Elaeya’s mother was a bit more awkward, but always polite.

Apparently the doctor had informed my mother that Elaeya was clear to go home, so we packed her things when she started yawning.

I took her in my arms. She mumbled a, “I can walk”, at the same time she laid her head on my chest and closed her eyes. She was asleep before we reached my car.

My parents took hers to the packhouse, and I drove us to our home.

— Chapter Forty-Five —

AN IDEA HAD JUST BEEN PLANTED

— Kaden —

I walked into my drawing room, with Jean-Philippe on my heels.

I had decided to do as much business from home as I could while Elaeya was getting back on her feet. I had hired nurses who stayed in shift twenty-four hours here, and I hired help for Mrs. Raynolds, to make everything as simple as possible.

Elaeya was spending more time up, but she still slept sixteen hours throughout the night and day.

I waved at the other winged chair for Jean-Philippe to sit. Mrs. Raynolds brought us coffee.

“How are things with Jasmine?” I asked sipping from my cup, sitting comfortably.

The days were not that cold yet, but Mrs. Raynolds had taken it upon herself to make sure the fireplaces in a few of the rooms were kept burning joyfully for Elaeya’s comfort and health. It was still day outside, but it was a grey one and the fire gave more life to the room.

Jean-Philippe smiled, bessotted. “It’s going well.”

“Have you spend some time talking or are you just trying for lingual root canals.”

He blushed.

Kids.

He coughed uncomfortably and shifted in his chair. “N-no… Erm, no, we talked,” he stammered.

I sipped at my coffee, and kept my eyes on him.

He shifted again.

“You know that Jasmine is a minor, right?”

“Erm, yes, erm, until next month.” He grabbed his coffee, looked at it, then put it back on the side table.

“She’s not leaving here until she’s eighteen, you understand that?”

“I understand,” he said looking at his fingers.

“If she ever goes with you, it will be her choice.”

He nodded.

“I don’t think she’s ready to be a Luna,” I said.

He bit his lip but said nothing.

“She has a lot to learn. If she wants to, and you want her to, she will need a lot of help to get there. She’s young, both of you are.”

“I can give her help and resources. I can hire coaches to train her, and my mother is there too, she could help her,” he said looking up, rushing the words out.

I nodded. “Here, I’ll let my mother handle the situation.”

He nodded.

“I won’t stop you from seeing her, but there are things that need to be taken care of. I let the two of you have a little time off together, but now I need for the Alpha of Boisclair to get his head out of his ass,” I said. “You came here for finalizing the contracts for the joint resort. It still hasn’t been done and it’s been days.” I looked at him sideways.

He looked a little guilty.

“Granted, I have been busy myself, but despite my mate nearly dying, things are still moving forwards on my side,” I continued. “How many businesses do you own outside of Boisclair proper?” I knew that everything outside of his pack and pack-related business, all there was were investments, hedge funds, and trust funds, everything managed by a firm, in little risk, safe portfolios. And most businesses he had invested in were owned by pack members and he had little to do with them, other than signing checks. Giving the size and wealth of Boisclair, he’s had it fairly easy.

“You told me you wanted to do things differently, that you wanted to expand, be more involved than your father and the other Alphas before him,” I said. “I agreed to help you in that, but don’t expect me to do all the work for you.”

“No, no, I would not—,” he stammered.

“Here’s the situation,” I said putting my coffee cup down on the table. “Firstly, if you start businesses outside of Boisclair, it will require time, expertise, and work, a lot of work. Secondly, if you end up with a young inexperienced Luna, it will require a lot of time and investments there too. You can’t just throw money at the problem for it to go away, and it will require both of you to work for it.” I let that sink in.

He nodded.

“Thirdly, the Moonhunter Brotherhood, they don’t have as many resources as they used too. They are spread thin and are struggling more and more. You and I have been mostly spared from the consequences of this as our packs are pretty hard to ignore, but the feedback I’m getting from other packs is getting worse with years. I’ve had more packs ask for my help in the

last two years than in the previous five, and more in those five than the previous ten." I crossed my fingers together. "You've stayed away from most of the politics, you can keep doing that if you want, but I'm not. If someone comes to me for help and I'm given no reason to refuse, then I won't."

I bent to grab the coffee pot to make myself a second cup.

"The thing is, I was helping you out until you grew of age, and settled in your position. But you're the one who approached me for this resort. And now, my little sister is your mate. Some would see this as involvement. Depending on how you handle the situation, you could either stay mostly on the sideline, or you could be dragged in the fray." I put milk and sugar in the cup too. "A mate can change a lot of things including how you are seen as Alpha. If you walk back home one day with a Devon on your arm, it could change things, and not always in predictable ways."

I took a sip, perfect.

"Fourthly, I might be heading for more trouble ahead. Right now, the Brotherhood doesn't like me, and I might have to involve myself in another war, which they will like me for even less. And there is Elaeya, I've come to know that there are a lot of people who might want to gun for her, and having her here could change how Blakemore is seen.

I could really take a strong ally right now. It could change things, it could limit the amount of shit the Brotherhood would be motivated to throw my way." I took another sip. "I don't want to exploit Jasmine in all this, so this relationship you have, I won't use this as leverage in any of this. I'm not going to ask anything. I just want you to know that it's not as simple as it may feel. It's probably tempting to act like teenagers in love right now, but you know that this is not a luxury you can even indulge in, not mindlessly so. You're an Alpha. Your pack needs you, and don't expect to be able to fallback on the Brotherhood when in need. Maybe they'll be able to do more for you, make an exception for you—given your financial backing—but they won't be a reliable resource.

As for me, I'm most probably going to get pretty busy. I'm gonna do my best for you and Jasmine, but it could get very limited in what I can do soon. Furthermore, if things don't go too well for me, I could as well become persona non grata with the Brotherhood, which could mean that any further involvement between us could stain your reputation along the way.

I know we worked for months on the resort, but I want you to really think about this, all of it, before you sign anything. And if you bring Jasmine with you home, to later resent her because of who she is, I'm going to destroy you for it. You get me?"

He swallowed, but nodded.

"When you make your decision, do it right, take the time that you need, but fucking get it right. And don't fucking give her false hopes."

He nodded again shakily.

"You said you'd be here for a week, you have two days left. I won't kick you out if you want to stay longer, and can. You can also return as often as you want. But know the consequences before you act," I told him. "Also, you should know that a distance relationship for mates will cost you a lot more than I'm sure you're ready to pay. It can only be a short-term option, for your own good, you and Jasmine."

He was looking at his hands.

"Don't give me answers now, go back to the packhouse, and I highly suggest that you start having conversations with my sister."

"I will," he said, his voice more solid.

I nodded. "It'll be dinner soon," I said.

He got the message and got up.

"Talk," I told him.

"I will," he promised.

I nodded again and he left.

Mrs. Raynolds came to clear his cup of coffee.

"Is Elaeya up?" I asked her.

"Not yet Alpha."

I nodded.

I picked my phone and sent a message.

I finished my coffee slowly looking at the flames, thinking.

It took mostly ten minutes for the wizard to come in.

Mrs. Raynolds ushered him in, and he took place in the vacant chair next to mine.

After his altercation with the Other and all the work he did in Elaeya's hospital room, he slept for twenty hours straight, ate, took a shower, and went back to sleep for another ten hours. So today had been the first day he'd been actually vertical since then. But we hadn't had time to meet up yet.

"First off," I said. "Thank you. Elaeya is doing much better, she's going through recovery just like both you and the doctor have anticipated."

"Good to know," he said.

I nodded. "I'm not sure what deal you made with Mishka."

"Settling a debt, mostly."

I nodded. "Well, I'm not the type to let good work be unpaid. Name your price."

His eyebrows went way up.

"Before you settle for an amount, there are a few things I'd like to cover. Firstly, I heard you could ward the place against Others?"

"Yes, to an extent."

"Explain."

"There is always a limit to what can be done. I mean if an army of them show up and tries to push their way through, with enough force, with enough time, they will get through."

I nodded. "But with wards, it would be hard for your common Other to pass through?"

"They won't stroll casually in, if that is your question, no."

I nodded again. "Are there other things that can be blocked by wards?"

"Plenty of things. Nearly anything, at least temporarily. But some of those wards would require pretty extensive works, weeks, months, years, it depends against what I'd have to work with, if I have other practitioners helping me out, what tools I have, ingredients, the size of what is to be warded, and what it is. It can also depend on how impermeable you want this to be. Some wards can be pretty dense and would not allow you or your people to pass through either, without a wizard to usher you in or out. And it also depends on what you want the ward to do, or how long you want it to last. Do you want it to block intrusions like a solid wall of air? Do you just want to work on the immaterial? Do you want it to zap any assailant to oblivion?"

"It could do that?"

"It can do all sorts of things, man."

I thought furiously about it.

"Now, before you ask, I'm not warding your entire territory."

"Why?"

"I'm one wizard, not an army. There are limits to everything."

"What if it was more of a warning system."

"That would be a lot easier to setup. But it would take me a while, and it's not built with scrap paper, if you get my meaning."

I nodded. "What if I pay you, whatever wage you ask for, and get you tools and ingredients, whatever you need."

It was his turn to think it through.

I let him.

“It would not be cheap,” he said finally.

“I’m good for it.”

He snorted. “I bet you are.”

He thought about it some more. “Would take weeks, maybe more.”

I nodded. “You could still ward the main property against Others?”

“I’d focus on buildings, it’s easier to use walls to build their spiritual counterpart.”

I nodded. “All the building on packhouse land.”

“That’s a tall order man.”

“I’m sure. But you would be given time, resources, and money for it.”

He thought some more.

“Actually, there are a few other things I could be interested in hiring your services for,” I said.

“Man, how long do you want me to stay here?” he said a little bewildered.

That made me think.

“As long as necessary,” I said.

I will have to think it through some more, but an idea had just been planted.

— Chapter Forty-Six —

TURMOIL AND SADNESS

— Elaeya —

I did not want to eat another meal in my bedroom, so I went down to the kitchen before anyone took any initiatives.

I was getting tired of that room.

It was beautiful and well decorated, but there was not enough space in the wardrobe and commode to fit all the things that had been bought for me, and a few temporary storage options were lying here and there on the floor. Plus, there was a lot more stored in another bedroom.

It was a mess.

I did not dare go in there, and Mrs. Raynolds would select things for me and place them on the fainting couch in my room every day.

We ate, Kaden and I, together in amiable silence. He has managed, somehow, to lower his workload, and would spend all his free time with me. I must admit that I felt a little guilty in how much I appreciated it. I was afraid it would only make me want more.

We moved to the living room after the meal and watched a movie, cuddled on the big leather sofa.

I don't think I saw how it ended, and I felt myself being lifted up later.

"I can walk," I told him, like I did every other times.

"Of course you can," he admitted. I knew I was not particularly heavy for someone of his strength, but I still felt cosseted, and remorseful to enjoy this more than I should.

He still did not put me down and walked me up to my room.

Upstairs, he sat on the bed with me on his lap and used his free hand to move some of the pillows aside to free the blankets.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

He turned his head to look at me. "I am. Why do you ask?"

I shook my head. "I don't know. Something seemed off."

He furrowed his brows.

I let my head rest on his chest.

"You don't have to do all this," I said. "I am better and getting better still. I can take care of myself."

"Are you saying this because you want me to go away?" he asked.

"No, no, no. I don't."

"You have difficulty with people looking after you," he said.

I wanted to argue, but it felt wrong, so I said nothing instead and let my head where it was, not looking at anything in particular.

I knew he was still looking at me.

"I'm not trying to take your independence away," he said.

"I know."

"Do you? Is this why you cringed when my mother brought you a gift yesterday. Why you have difficulty looking at all the clothes and shoes you have? Why you're uncomfortable whenever someone cooks for you? Why you remind me every time I carry you that you can walk yourself? You're not that heavy Ela, it's not even a strain. None of us mind buying you stuff. We can all afford it. And no one is asking for anything in return. You owe nothing. No one is going to ask you to give it back for any reason. It's yours. People take care of you because we want to. I took you to bed because I chose to."

"You feel guilty," I said. "You should not. It was not your fault."

"It's still my land, my responsibility."

"No one can know everything Kaden. You keep putting too much on your shoulders. You can't protect everyone all the time."

"I could have done better."

"You did all that you had to do. I am alive. It would not be the last hurdle to face."

"What do you mean?"

"Just that there will be other difficulties ahead."

"For you?"

I nodded.

"Like what?"

"I don't know that Kaden."

"Will it be easier?"

I shook my head.

"Will you survive?"

I shrugged.

He cursed under his breath.

I looked up at him.

"I can't prepare for all eventualities if I don't know what I must prepare for," he complained in exasperation.

"I don't choose what I know." I put my hand on his cheek.

He grinded his teeth.

"It is not my clearest insight. It could still be subject to change."

"What do you mean?"

"The future is not set in stone. It is more like water that flows here and there, sometimes underground not to be seen, sometimes on the surface, but if the landscape changes, so does the flow. Not too many people use free will enough to reshape the future, but it can always happen. And I only see possibilities, like branches of a tree, I see more clearly the biggest and sturdiest, but there are so many of them. Sometimes I get a glimpse at two different branches and they may or not both happen. I don't know. I don't know what I will face, but I know it could be hard, dangerous, I don't know if I will survive."

I could see worry eat at him.

"But I also know we will marry. And have children. Children that will grow tall and strong."

He blinked, halted in his brooding by the sudden knowledge.

I rubbed my thumb on his cheek and along his jawline. He leaned into my touch.

"Does it mean that it happens later in years, or that you won't die?" he asked

"Or those are two opposing future and something could still sway things one way or the other," I said.

"Children?"

I nodded. "There are times when it is difficult for me to separate the future from the present. There had been morning when I expected a toddler to jump into bed with us."

He bit his lips.

"What do you want to ask?"

He closed his eyes for an instant. "It's a little disturbing at times how you keep getting inside my mind."

"I am sorry," I pleaded. "I did not want to intrude."

He shook his head. "I know."

"You don't have to tell me."

He put his left hand on my cheek, mirroring me, his right arm still around my back.

I waited patiently.

"I had a lot of time to think lately," he said. I saw his jaw tighten. "What it did to you. I couldn't do anything."

"Most cannot fight Others," I said.

"I'm going to find a way. I'm not sitting on the sideline again." His jaw tightened again. "I guess seeing you up on that wall, it made me understand things."

I tilted my head slightly, trying to understand what he was trying to say. "You are trying to say that you love me?" The word just came out, but when I heard them, I knew them to be true.

His eyes widened.

"I—I guess I am," he said looking at me a little baffled. He shook his head, as if he was trying to shake something off. "I knew right then that I would have preferred getting my arm cut off than letting this happen to you."

It was my turn to be shaken. I took a sharp intake of air as the vivid image struck me.

He gave me a knowing smile. "I guess I'm not the only one realizing things."

I swallowed. "I-I would not have lived well with myself if you had lost an arm."

He kissed my forehead.

"I could have known sooner—that something was happening to you," he said. "If the bond would have been forged."

I looked up at him.

"You said we'll get kids and everything. I mean, if it's meant to happen anyways—. I know you said you were not ready. I can wait. It's just—."

"You are right," I said.

He searched my eyes for a clearer answer.

"It will happen," I said. "I am ready."

"Now?" he asked, his breathing hitching up.

"I can barely keep my eyes open, Kade."

“Of course,” he said. “You get better first. Then we can take care of this?”

I nodded and yawned.

“Let’s put you to bed first.”

“I’m not a child.”

“I know.”

“Will you join me?”

He kissed me.

“I will.”

* * * * *

On Friday, Shae made sure everyone would be there for dinner. She took it upon herself to reunite everyone, so she moved this to the big packhouse dining room and insisted on both Jean-Philippe and my parents to join us.

The fourteen of us enjoyed a meal of duck à l’orange.

Jean-Philippe, who was a little shy at first, found his voice very rapidly and after an animated conversation with Sebastian about stories of him and Jean-Philippe’s father, Marcel, he moved the conversation to describing his packhouse to Jasmine who was eating everyone of his words like water given to a Saharan dying man.

“Can I ask you something?” Sebastian asked my father a little later.

“Sure,” my father said

“You’re an inja, right?”

He nodded.

“What’s an inja?” asked Nadine.

“A different breed of werewolf,” replied Sebastian.

“There are still other breeds?” asked Amy.

“Amy,” Shea reprobated her daughter.

“There are still plenty,” explained my father. “Just not as many as lukáns.”

“I thought they had all died out,” Amy said.

“Many did,” said my father. “But some are more numerous than you would think.”

“What about you?” she asked my mother. “You don’t smell like a wolf. What are you?”

My mother blinked at her, rigid as a statue.

“Amy,” Kaden said. He did not raise his voice, or said it reproachfully either, but she knew she was asked to drop it.

Jasmine opened her mouth about to ask something, but caught herself halfway, closed it, and looked down at her plate, then acted as if she had not been about to talk.

Jean-Philipped stopped talking to Darren about the new sports car he bought, and turn worriedly to Jasmine. She just shook her head.

I think she was starting to worry about her actions. I knew all too well how the realisation of becoming Luna changes rapidly your perspective on your actions.

As for Amy’s question, I also knew that if Kaden and I were forging this bond soon, it would also mean that there would be no turning back, not that I had been considering this, not for a long time now.

And obviously, after what happened in the hospital, there were probably rumours circulating around about me already.

I was fairly sure Kaden had asked for everyone’s discretion, but I was also fairly sure the stories had moved around regardless.

“Is it a secret?” asked Gwen.

Kaden gave her a look. She snapped her lips together and looked down at her plate.

“It is,” I said.

It would not be for long, regardless. It would only be harder for this pack, this family to accept me, us, if they did not know. The only way to make a good decision is with proper information.

I don’t know what they will decide, but I know that they will need to, eventually.

All eyes had turned to me.

“She is half-witch half-vitteraï,” I said.

“Cool,” said Gwen. “A witch.”

“What’s a vitti-thingy,” asked Amy.

My mother looked me in the eyes.

I nodded.

She inclined her head, respecting my decision.

“Vitteraï,” she corrected Amy. “The bearers of the ways of the spirits.”

“What’s that?”

“Werewolves called them spirit wolves,” Sebastian told his daughter.

“I never heard of them,” said Shae.

“It is because our existence has been mostly erased from recent memories. Very few knows we ever existed,” my mother said.

“Why?” asked Jasmine unable to withhold her curiosity any longer.

“We are biologically magical in nature and as such, has been hunted like dragons, gorgons, and many more, for parts.”

Everyone stopped talking.

“We have been experimented with, slaved, trafficked, and killed in great numbers, until so few were left that it became easier to convince the world we were no more,” my mother continued. “And we have been hunted like vulgar pests for the risk we posed.”

I saw Shae look at her husband and son, seeing by their expressions that they already knew of this. She then looked at me and frowned, concerned.

“What risk?” asked Gwen, after realizing no one else was asking, her voice small and careful.

“To breed outside of our kin. To create hybrids,” said my mother casually, then she returned her attention to her plate.

She, my father, Kaden, and I were the only ones still eating.

Slowly everyone returned to their meal in silence.

Lisa raised her head sharply, dropping her fork. “Why, though?” she asked. “What is wrong with you being a hybrid?” she asked my mother and I.

“Because our young inherit differently than most.” I answered this time. “Because we connect with land, spirit, ancestors, because the sheer access to blood, even partially of another species, doesn’t stop us from reaching further into what we can be, and can become.”

Most looked absolutely confused.

“So that’s how it works?” exclaimed Sebastian.

All eyes turned to him.

“It means, being half-blood doesn’t mean they are limited like half-bloods. They can access what a pure blood can,” he explained.

The girls looked mostly confused.

“Of both?” asked Shae in sudden realisation.

He nodded.

“I don’t get it,” said Jasmine.

“It means that this little lady,” he said pointing his fork at me. “Can access all that a spirit wolf can do, and a witch, and an inja werewolf. And when they have kids,” he added waving his fork in both Kaden and I’s direction. “Then that child will get all of her abilities, plus your brother’s.”

“Potentially,” I corrected him.

He nodded.

“That’s why you’re worried about the black market, and hitmen, and politician?” asked Darren at Kaden.

He nodded. “Vitteraï have been in position of power in the heydays. They became a sign of power and prosperity, until they got so hunted that they were feared like the plague for all the trouble they brought.”

“Will you bring us trouble?” Asked Amy at my mother and I.

Kaden glared at her and she cowered.

“It doesn’t matter,” said Shea. “They’re family, we take care of family.”

Sebastian smiled at his wife. “We can prepare for it.”

“It could be easier to walk away,” said my father.

Sebastian smiled wickedly, but Shae was the one supplying the words behind the smile.

“We don’t walk away. Anyone touch any of us or ours, and we’ll unleash all the hounds of hell.”

Sebastian looked at her proudly. “We’re fighters. She’s with us now, so are you. You’re family. That’s the end of it,” he said.

Kaden pressed his back against the back of his chair, his plate empty. He crossed his arms and looked pleased at his parents with a wolfish smile plastered on his face.

“Sorry,” said Darren, as his phone rang. He left the table to take the call in the corridor.

“Don’t worry,” Shae told my parents and I. “You have a place here. We’ll take good care of you.” She took a bite. “Isn’t it more than time to add her officially to the pack?” she asked Kaden. “And you too, if you want,” she added for my parents.

Something in this felt odd.

“Maybe not now,” I said.

“Why?” she asked me.

Kaden did not. He was getting more and more used to my insight now.

I shrugged.

Eva looked suddenly worried and rushed to Darren.

Everyone stopped talking to look up.

She opened the big double-doors of the dining room. Darren was in the corridor on the other side, his back pressed against the wall, sitting on the ground, his elbows on his raised knees, his head hanging down, his face invisible to us, his cellphone still in his right hand.

“Babe, what’s wrong?” Eva asked. “Babe? Darren?” she lowered herself next to him.

He didn’t move or said anything.

All I could sense from him was turmoil and sadness.

— Chapter Forty-Seven —

NO WEAPON IS AS STRONG AS INFORMATION

— Eveline —

I could barely stop myself from crying.

Darren was numb, sitting on the couch in one of the drawing rooms like a zombie. I've seen him go through difficult times before, but I've never seen him fall apart like this.

He has spent a full hour holding me by the waist, his face pressed against my belly, crying.

I had to call back the last number he'd talked to, which had been his brother Michael, to learn what had happened.

I tried to stay strong, but as I heard Michael's broken voice on the other side of the receiver, recounting the murders of their two youngest brothers, my tears could not be contained for very long.

That time, everyone heard the conversation on the other end, and silence reigned.

Mom took the girls, Jean-Philippe, and Elaeya's parents to another room. Dad went somewhere making phone calls, and Kaden went in another direction doing the same.

I didn't realise Elaeya had stayed behind, until Darren calmed down, and she helped me move him off the floor to one of the smaller drawing rooms. She closed the door behind her as she left, leaving us along in our chagrin.

She returned maybe ten minutes later with a couple of cups and a teapot. She poured us each one. It smelt strangely floral.

"You will leave when ready," she told us.

"Where?" I asked, while blowing my nose for the umpteenth time.

"Stonewillow," she said.

Darren's head perked up.

She sat before us moving the tea tray aside to sit on the coffee table.

"Things will move quickly," she explained. "Kaden will dispatch warriors to accompany you. You will be with your family, and prepare for what is to come. There will be a war. You will prepare the way."

"Is that what Kaden said?" I asked her.

“He doesn’t know yet, but will soon.” She turned to Darren. “The support you wanted. You will have it. See your brothers, mourn, and prepare the way.”

Darren blinked at her.

“How do you know?” I asked her.

“I know things.”

“Like the future?”

“Sometimes.”

“You knew this would happen?” Darren asked. It was the first time he said anything since it happened. His voice was hollow and it made me want to cry again, I furiously tried to blink away the tears.

She shook her head. “I don’t control what I learn.”

“What else do you know?” he asked again.

“There will be three wars soon, one of words, one of loss, one of betrayal, this is the first.”

“What does ‘words’ mean?” he asked.

She shook her head. “I do not know yet. All that I know is that it will be a battle for words.”

“Words,” he said, his voice gaining back a little colour as he thought aloud. “Like information?”

She tilted her head, pensive. Her eyes shifted to a beautiful gem-like quality.

“They protected something important,” she said, her voice distant, strange, calm. “Find it.”

She blinked rapidly a few times, and her eyes returned to their lovely pink.

“I should go,” she said raising up, unstable.

I helped her up. “Are you okay?”

“Yes, just tired.”

She left us soon after.

“I’m going,” said Darren.

“Me too.”

— Kaden —

I was sitting in one of the big chairs in one of the drawing rooms in the packhouse. Elaeya was on my lap, her head on my chest, fast asleep.

I’d wrapped my blazer over her shoulders.

I had just finished my last call.

When she came in, Elaeya told me her three wars insight. It disturbed me to no end, let alone that she knew nothing of the other incoming two.

She said to send Darren, Eva, and warriors to Stonewillow. At this point, I didn't question her anymore. She operated with far more information than I, even as fractured as it was. My father managed to get some information from one of his contacts, but it was still limited. I decided not to call the Thomas's, they had enough to deal as it was. I could call later, or simply let Darren and Eva give me the information once they got there, which was probably the most respectful thing to do.

Three fucking wars.

First, this, I thought. *Words. Informations.* That sounded a lot like the issues Darren was talking to me about. Hard-drives and black books being stolen. Information. They were werewolves infiltrating packs, most probably under the leadership of a new ambitious Alpha who wanted to gain something. Probably exploiting the fact that the Brotherhood is both stretched thin, plus dealing with the aftermath of the war with Nubinero, and now Greysky and Akayume.

I had had to ask Jean-Philippe to find me the rundown of Greysky, because no one in the Brotherhood wanted to give it to me, but what I've gotten was worrisome. They were building up to something. And Akayune had not been accounted for yet. Technically, it was none of my business, but I'm not the type to look away because it doesn't concern me. I'm going to know and be ready, if I had to get involved, or simply get splashed as this pass me by, I'll be ready.

There is nothing like a prepared warrior to face any situation. No weapon is as strong as information.

We'll have to deal as we learn more, which lead us to the next point.

A war of loss. So, probably, something will be lost. Which is way too vague to get any conclusions out of this. But the other one is what worries me the most.

A war of betrayal.

Fuck me!

Someone knocked gently on the door.

"Yeah," I replied, not too loudly so not to wake Elaeya.

Jean-Philippe's head popped up. "Can we talk?"

I nodded.

He closed behind himself and came to sit next to me.

"It's—." I looked at my watch. "One thirty in the morning, you should be sleeping."

He shook his head. “I want to talk first.”

“Okay,” I said.

“I thought a lot about what you told me last time.”

Man, it’s all good and everything, but this could have waited until the morning.

“I don’t think I’d be able to deal with all this like you do,” he said.

“No one asks you too.”

“But—,” he hesitated. “Your mother spoke of family. Doesn’t that make me one too?”

“Technically.”

“You will do something for Darren’s family, won’t you?”

“It ain’t my pack,” I said. “But you’re right, he’s family. If his brother ask for my help, he will have it, and regardless, Darren will have my support whatever he chooses to do.”

He nodded. “If it was me, would you do the same?”

I quirked my brow at him.

“You would, wouldn’t you?”

“I don’t drop an ally without a good reason.”

“Is that all that I am, an ally?”

“I believe it’s a little early to say otherwise, and I hadn’t had time to talk with Jasmine since all this chaos started.”

He nodded. “But it could change?”

“It could,” I conceded.

“So Darren is my family too?”

“You see it how you want to.”

“You’re worried about her?” he said, changing the subject, looking at the sleeping Elaeya.

“I am.”

“She’s family too.”

I let him finish his own train of thought.

“What if we’re not just allies?” he asked.

“What do you mean?” I asked carefully.

“What if it’s family?”

“Like?”

“If we’re to become brothers, wouldn’t it be better for our packs to be sisters.”

I looked at him intently.

“I mean, I’m not saying for Boisclair to become another pack under Blakemore. Besides, the distance is too great it would be difficult, but it could mean a stronger alliance, working in tandem. I know I’m probably not the greatest asset on a battlefield, but I was serious when I said I wanted to expand and gain assets outside of packland. Maybe even train my warriors a bit more, make sure we can work well together. It could be, like, guaranteed asylum, financial and military support of one another, any decision with ramifications outside of the packs could mean a common approval, that sort of thing.”

“You might not have noticed, but I’m not super strong on asking for permission,” I said, my voice lower.

“I know, that’s not what I mean, maybe something like our own little UN or Eurozone or something. We wouldn’t have to ask for permission, but there would also be a sort of NATO agreement too, so if anything happens we support each other.”

“You’ve been studying politics a lot lately,” I noticed.

He smiled sheepishly.

“I want Jasmine to be safe. And happy. She won’t be happy if she has to leave her family when in trouble. And you said the brotherhood is struggling. I didn’t put two and two together, but there as been issues with them on my side too. If I keep relying on them, if they become unreliable, I’m going to regret it later. But I can’t do this entirely on my own. I’m young, but I’m not an idiot. I know I’m too much of a target to keep living in a bubble. I want to place my bet on Blakemore.”

“You know that this could lead you to trouble.”

“Your mate could lead you to trouble, but you’ll fight regardless.”

I nodded.

“What kind of man would I be if I ran and cowered.”

I looked closely at him.

He appeared full of doubts and insecurities which was to be expected at his age, with the things that were asked of him, I knew this intimately.

He kept his eyes on Elaeya, there was something there. I don’t think it’s Elaeya he was thinking about.

"Let me think about it. And so should you. Let see where it goes with Jasmine, how things go in the following weeks, work out how this would function exactly. There aren't many pack who has become sister packs, especially lately. The Brotherhood is not too fond of any entity that gets too big. You have the biggest fortune in the wolf world and I the biggest army. I still qualify in the top ten financially, we both have generations of accumulated pacts, and allies. My pack is the fourth biggest. It's not just two random packs becoming sisters. Anything that happened in the last few years has probably not freaked the Brotherhood like such an alliance would.

Before any such decision is made, we should both talk to our teams. It's gonna attract a lot of attention if we do. The biggest reason why no one gave you too much trouble so far was mostly because you stayed out of everything. Last time I went to the capital, there was one Brother who mentioned I could lose my position as a signatory because I've kept growing the way I did.

They hate my power structure, and I know one of the bigger packs in China is interested in replicating it. I've been having calls from that Alpha a lot lately. But those packs have been better tolerated because they don't have as many Alphas and ranked members as I do. I've more non-ranked members of Alpha bloodlines than most have ranked members and their families.

If the two of us pools our resources, even without fusing the packs completely, it'll still be a lot of accumulated power at the same place. Let's think it through first."

He nodded.

"I don't know what I can do for Darren, but I want to do something," he told me. "You got a better grasp on the situation, tell me what you need."

I nodded. "I need sleep. Tomorrow, Darren and Eva move to Stonewillow. I think you should go home, prepare, when I have information from them, I'll keep you posted."

He hesitated. "What about Jasmine."

"She's not eighteen yet."

"I know, I mean, later."

"You need to prepare the way for her," said Elaeya, her breath warm against my chest. "She has to prepare too. Three months. You will return five times before the end of the year, then she will go. You will talk to your people, about her, and Blakemore. What it all means, and find the path to take. You will need that time. You will choose before the third war."

"Wait, what?"

"Choose what?" I asked.

"What is family," she said.

I nodded.

“I don’t understand anything,” he said.

“Sleep. I’ll explain tomorrow,” I said.

— Chapter Forty-Eight —

WHAT HAS TO BE DONE WILL BE DONE

— Eveline —

We were at the airport on the outskirt of Blakeden.

Jasmine was weeping like a widow at her husband's funeral.

"Stop crying, please," pleaded Jean-Philippe. "Come here beauté," he said, his arms wide.

She rushed to him and they hugged like he was a soldier about to leave for the trenches of World War I.

"I'll be back soon," he whispered in her ear. "Before the end of the month, promised. Je te rapporterai un cadeau pour te remonter le moral, ma petite chérie." He kissed her.

His people signed for him to board the plane, but they would not rush their Alpha either and waited patiently for him to finish up.

Jean-Philippe and Jasmine muttered their farewell and he came to hug me.

"Take care of yourself, Eva."

"You too," I told him.

"Take care of her," he told Darren, shaking his hand.

"Always do," Darren answered.

"And take care of you too. We're family, if you need anything, call me."

"Much appreciated."

The men nodded at each other, then Jean-Philippe walked to the plane.

Jasmine kept jumping up on her toes waving frantically at him.

He turned and gave her one last wave and the door closed behind him.

"What did he say?" she asked me.

My French wasn't that good yet, but I knew enough words to make out the gist of it.

"I will bring you back a gift to cheer you up, my little darling," I translated.

"Oooooohhh," she cooed with her hand on her heart, her eyes on the Boisclair plane as it began moving into position for takeoff. "Beauté means pretty, right?"

"It means beauty," I corrected her. "Belle means pretty."

"Oh, he calls me that too." She turned to me. "Isn't it romantic?"

"Sure."

"I won't survive this," she said, crying again. "I hurt already."

"Kaden survived twenty-two years of separation, you'll survive a couple of weeks."

"What do you mean? He just met Elaeya."

Oops!

I didn't say anything more and turned to Darren.

"Are you okay?" I asked him.

He nodded.

He had been a lot more silent than usual. As much as Jasmine can't stop talking when things are wrong, he turns silent. But I knew it would pass and eventually he would talk to me. So I just gave him a peck on the cheek.

The plane took off and Jasmine began wailing in earnest.

I hugged her and tried to cheer her up but nothing seemed to work.

Our plane moved into position.

"I have to go Jass," I told her.

"You-you can-can't," she said in between hiccups.

I looked at the car, pleading.

Sam got out and came to us.

"Can you take her home, please?" I asked him.

"Sure," he said.

Jasmine refused to let go of me, and I had to force her towards Sam. When he moved in to get a hold of her, she let herself fall to her knees, the waterworks even worse than it already was. But Sam caught her before she hit the ground, took her in his arms like a child and took her to the car.

"She can be such a drama queen sometimes," I muttered to Darren.

We walked to our plane.

"I'm a little worried for Boisclair," Darren told me.

"Maybe it'll get better," I suggested.

“I hope,” he said as we took our seat. We have bigger things to worry about, and soon we fell back to a heavy silence, knowing what we were going to deal with.

I laid my head on his shoulder and took his hand between mines.

We can do this.

— Elaeya —

My mother and I were in the upstairs library, sitting both on the window seat, our legs crossed, one in front of the other, looking outside at the setting sun, the trees seemingly ablaze, dressed in their red leaves, at least for the few that still had any.

“I will forge the bond,” I told my mother.

She said nothing for a few seconds.

“I know this is my place,” I said.

“I know,” she replied.

I turned my head to look at her. “Do you?”

She nodded, still looking at the dusk.

“There will be wars,” I said.

“I know.”

“What do you know?”

She closed her eyes and took a long inspiration.

“You will save lives,” she said, her eyes still closed. “You will take your place here, you will rule wisely, you will be loved, but you will suffer too. You will hurt and hurt him.” She opened her eyes and looked at the ground.

I looked too, there were two squirrels chasing one another.

“You will start a war,” she said.

“Are you sure?” I asked hesitantly.

She nodded.

We looked through one another’s eyes.

“I will not leave,” she told me.

I nodded.

“What has to be done will be done,” she said.

My mother and I stayed together a little longer, but she left before dark had completely settled.

I went to see Kaden in his office.

I generally don't go there, I am always worried I am going to distract him, or bother him. He did now most of his business at home and would only go to the office for meetings and such.

But I felt compelled to go and see him, and I never really question my intuition.

I knocked on the door.

"Yes," he said on the other side.

I moved in.

"Are you okay?" he asked, worried as he saw who it was at the door.

"I am," I said. "Are you?"

He looked about to say 'Everything's fine', but he caught himself and hesitated for a second before he answered, "Not really."

"Anything I can do?" I asked.

He seemed about to say 'No', but he stopped himself again. "I don't know," he said frankly.

He looked tired.

I moved closer to look at the papers on his desk.

He wrapped one arm around my hip. I bent forward a bit to take a better look.

He moved me to a more comfortable position on his lap and I let him.

There was a lot of papers. I began piling them in five different piles.

"What are you doing?" he asked me.

I shrugged, I still had no idea and I just took the folders, and papers and split them one after the other in one pile, then another, then another in what seemed like no exact pattern.

He didn't try to stop me, or tell me I was messing up his things. He just let me, looking a little curiously at me.

Once all the papers were organised in their neat little piles, I put one hand on one of them and closed my eyes.

I wasn't sure what I was looking for, but I knew I had to look for something, so I did and waited patiently until it became clear.

I took that pile and dumped it in the recycling bin next to the desk.

"What just happened?" Kaden asked me.

"Bad deals," I said.

I put my hand on the next pile and repeated my process.

It took me a few more seconds until I opened my eyes again. I grabbed a Post-it, slammed in on top and wrote, *Need more information — Brandon.*

Kaden bent down to look at it, as I put my hand on another stack.

I put another Post-it on it, and jotted, *November*, on it.

"Why November?" he asked me.

"Don't look at it until then."

"Why?"

I shrugged. "Maybe you will have the right information then?" I suggested. "Maybe it will be the right time? Maybe it will be a better timing?" I shrugged again.

"Okay," he agreed.

I put my hand on the next pile. It took maybe two seconds, then I added a Post-it on it with *yes* written on it.

"Yes to what?" he asked.

"All of it," I said.

I did the same with the last stack. It took me the longest. Kaden didn't move and waited patiently. I finally wrote, *to evaluate* on its Post-it.

"Evaluate?" he asked.

"I am not sure about those. I am missing information. I think they are more complex issues."

He looked at his desk. "So that's that?"

I turned to look at him. He looked a little aghast.

"Did I mess anything?" I asked suddenly worried.

"Nope," he said. "You just saved me hours of work."

"Erm, would you not prefer looking at them yourself?"

He pressed his back against his chair to better look at me.

"I learned not to question you," he said.

I felt my eyes go round.

He smile and gave me a kiss. It was a good one.

"You tried to cause a mess?" he asked me.

"Of course not."

He shrugged. "Then I will send this pile back to Brandon." He pointed at the one in need of information. "And I will give this one too with a no," he said pointing at the one in the recycling bin.

I felt a little uncomfortable for throwing it, instead of just writing 'no' on it.

"This one will wait until next month." He pointed at the November pile. "This one I will review quickly tomorrow and sign everything that I have too." He pointed at the yes stack. "And I will study the rest," he said. "That pretty much steamrolled everything."

I looked at the piles worried.

"What's up?" he asked me.

I recounted to him my conversation with my mother.

He pressed my head on his shoulder. I let him.

"We'll deal with it in time," he said. "Just promise me one thing."

"Anything," I said.

"The second you or your mother have any more information about what's coming, you tell me. I can't act if I don't know what I need to or how."

I nodded. "Sometimes knowing is a burden," I told him.

"If you can bear it then so can I."

I kissed him.

My arms twined around his neck and soon, we were pressed against one another, our tongue dancing to their own quiet song.

His hands traveled up and down my back, pressing me further against him.

When the kiss finally ended, we were out of breath.

"Tonight," I said.

"What?"

"The bond."

I didn't need to explain myself further, he understood.

His eyes darkened.

He took a good grip with his left arm around me, and used the other to push himself up.

It didn't take long until he carried me this way, with my legs around him, all the way to my bedroom.

— Chapter Forty-Nine —

WHAT WAS TO COME

— Elaeya —

Kaden closed and locked the door behind us. Not that we were often visited at night, but I supposed he was not ready to risk any form of interruptions.

He took his phone out and clicked the mute button on, then put it on the side table.

I did the same and gave him the phone to put it with the other.

I did not have many people calling me, but I suppose I was not ready to take the risk either.

Kaden slowly put me down on the bed, sitting up. He began unbuttoning his shirt. I got on my feet and took over from there. He looked at me carefully. He put his hand on my arms, caressing up and down. I looked up to him as I finished with the last button and pulled up his shirt from his pants.

His eyes bored into mine. I tried to keep my focus to make sure he would not get dragged into my gaze.

I moved my hand on his belly and chest, and up on his shoulders, below the fabric, dragging it off him. It fell on the floor. He bent his neck low for his lips to meet mine.

I felt his hands reach for the zipper at the back of my dress. Once undone, he pushed it off my shoulders and let it fall softly on the ground.

I tried to keep my posture straight and not instinctively cover myself.

His fingers were delicate as they brushed my skin on either side of me—from my waist to my hips.

As delicate was his touch was, as hard was his gaze. There was an animalistic fervor in his eyes, a hunger that nearly made me cower, his desire more than evident as he let his gaze lower over my body.

I undid his belt, which had his stare snap right back to my face.

I pulled it out of its loops.

He kissed me again, this time, moving his attention quickly to my neck and shoulders. He undid my bra faster that I worked on his pants.

I did not manage to undress him fast enough before he took me in his arms and placed me on the mattress.

He moved his lips to my breasts. My breath hitched up and I let my head fall back down, my eyes closed, lost in the sensation. His hands were everywhere. When I looked down, I could see the muscles in his shoulders move and strain in the wan light of the moon, and I stared in fascination.

He noticed me noticing him, and smiled a wicked smile.

He moved his mouth lower and lower, caressing my belly, all the way to the rim of my underwear. He never let his eyes wander from mine as he slid his fingers under the sheer fabric and pulled it slowly down.

My chest was rising and falling in rapid succession. He kept looking at me as he kissed me, his gaze locking me in place, a roguish smile on his lips as he extended his tongue.

I whimpered uncontrollably.

I wanted to look back at him, but I couldn't.

My back arched as I soon began to convulse from pleasure.

Not long after, Kaden took me in his arms and dragged me under the blanket, then got rid of the pants I did not manage to take off him, and slid under the covers with me.

I felt his hand between my thighs as he oriented himself. He lower his lips to mine, the discrepancy in our height making it all the more challenging, but we managed.

I circled my arms around his waist, running my hand up his back, feeling his muscles strain in the position, shifting under my touch.

He pressed himself against my core, bracing himself with both his hands on either side of me.

I raised my legs as he pushed himself further. Our breathing loud.

He moved slowly at first and I met him halfway, but soon he accelerated and I could only comply to his movements, my legs wrapped around him, our lips never apart for more than the length of a breath.

The intensity built slowly but steadily. My fingers were knotted in his hair, my voice loud in his ears.

I lost contact with time as we moved in cadence.

I became frantic, my nails clawing at his skin, but he did not waver until I receded.

He slowed to a tender rhythm and pressed his lips against mine once more.

"You are mine and I am yours," he murmured. I recognised the words of what I knew now was a claim, and I repeated after him.

"You are mine and I am yours."

“Before the moon, and the sun, and sky above,” we said together, him holding himself up on his elbows on either side of my head. Our movements excruciatingly slow.

“Through this life until my last breath, through death until all fades to nothing. I am yours and you are mine.”

He kissed me briefly, then bit my neck.

The pressure went rapidly from pleasure to pain, and then ecstasy.

It was like an explosion under my skin, a fire that I could not fight, that I would not fight.

I could hardly notice what was happening, but in a brief instant of clarity, I lean forwards and bit him too. My teeth sharpened, I licked at his blood, making sure to pierce my tongue along the way, letting my blood seep into the wound.

He moaned and shuddered, his movements now uncontrolled and arhythmical.

We rode our pleasure for as long as we could.

When he let go to crash down on the mattress, he let himself roll sideways, taking me with him, instead of crushing me underneath his weight, and I landed atop him.

It took a while for our laboured breath to subside, and we fell asleep soon after.

We changed position throughout the night a few times—sometimes awakening for a little action that was soon followed by more sleep.

In the morning, we woke up slowly around the same time.

He was looking at me.

“I still can’t believe how I landed a mate so out of my league,” he murmured half-awakened.

I quirked a brow at him, unconvinced.

He looked me up and down in my nakedness for answer.

I pointedly looked him down then back up.

He smiled wolfishly.

“Some women would prefer men with less scars, and a little less intimidating,” he said.

I kissed him and moved atop him, he put his hands on my waist.

“I’m not easily intimidated,” I murmured.

He grinned at that. “I guess you aren’t.”

I moved my finger on his scars. He did have a lot of them. They crossed over his muscles in various shapes.

His phone started vibrating on the bedside table.

He looked at it angrily, but answered after a few seconds.

“Yes,” he said.

“Alpha?” began Brandon’s voice.

“No,” said Kaden.

“W-What?”

“No, not this morning. Deal with whatever is happening, I’m taking the morning off. Relay to Jayson if you need to.”

“Is something wrong?” asked Brandon concerned.

“Yes, I want my morning uninterrupted, this is not it.”

“Oh, erm, okay then.”

Kaden hung up and put the phone back on the side table.

I quirked a brow inquisitively at him.

“This morning,” he said. “I’m all yours.”

“Mmmh,” I muttered. “I could get used to this.”

“Someone freed a lot of my schedule yesterday.”

“How convenient.”

We spend more time fooling around in bed, until he laid his head on his hand, elbow against the mattress and moved his fingers on my naked skin, tracing the light scars on my belly with a frown.

The marks were nearly completely gone. I never scarred easily.

He traced them all one by one until he landed on a small round one, barely visible, a little to the side.

He looked up at me inquisitively.

“Gunshot wound,” I said.

His frown deepened as he looked back at it. And then he found another, near my collarbone.

He looked back up.

“Gunshot wound,” I supplied. “Same time.”

He looked back, searching ardently this time, and found another on my arm.

“Same time?” he asked.

I nodded.

“Are there others?”

I pointed at a place on my thigh, and another on my opposite hip, and one more right under one of my breast.

“The others are on my back,” I said.

“Show me.”

I turned around and moved my hair aside.

Now that he was really looking for them, he found them one by one. The colour was not unlike the rest of my skin, they were not keloid either, and it was simply the slight change in texture than gave them away. Human eyes might have had difficulty perceiving them at all.

“How many?” he asked.

“Fourteen.”

“What happened?” There was a detachment in his voice that hid his anger, but not well enough to hide it from me.

“There had been an attack on our cabin. I was inside, but my parents got caught in the open. I was fifteen. I dropped to the ground while the bullets flew everywhere and through everything, including my parents. I left from the back door and circled around. I managed to raise a veil to hide us and drag them both out of the fray. But I was not able to do that and protect myself from the bullets at the same time.

We had made a promise that if one of us was attacked, and it looked like a lost cause, the others would run and save themselves. I knew they said this mostly for me, because they never heeded this themselves. I saw them many times take unnecessary risks for either one of them, or me.

They were all that I had. I could not let them die. I could not face what was to come alone. So I took the risk. The cabin was compromised and I dragged them to a nearby cave system that was hidden fairly well a couple of kilometers away.

I had been hit a couple of times, but I manage to stop the bleeding and I went back and forth to get all that I needed to treat their wounds and stop the bleeding. They were both unconscious at that point. They tried to have me leave them a few times before then, but I refused.

By nightfall, I went and scouted the cabin. It had been raided and I foolishly thought I could go and get supply. I never detected anyone inside because there was none, but they had decided to keep watch on the place, as they understood someone had been alive as they found no corpses.

They got to me, shot me multiple times, and took me away.

They locked me for a while in a small dark cell. They were speculating on what to do with me. Until another came and realised what I was. He forbade them from touching me in case I would decrease in value, which was a small mercy, but as I tried to fight back, he found sleeping pills and force fed them to me constantly, eventually adding a few others to the mix that made me lethargic and unable to fight back.

He tended my wounds and prepared to process a transaction with me. I believe I was held captive for maybe a month when I found a way out. I had not eaten a proper meal in a while, but I had managed to skip pills, and as I regained control over my mind, I ran out.

I very nearly did not make it out. But my parents had recovered, in that time and tracked me. And so they got to me first and we left.

Around a week later my father left for three whole days. My mother never said anything but I know that she knew as well as I what he went to do. Whoever they really were, I doubt that they survived. They had gotten the drop on us once, but it would not happen again."

"I would have done the same," said Kaden in a low growl.

I knew he would have.

— Chapter Fifty —

ARE YOU ASKING FOR HELP?

— Kaden —

“First off,” I said. “My condolences.”

Michael Thomas was sitting on the other side of my computer screen, next to Darren.

“Thank you,” Michael said. I could hear how raw the emotions were in his voice.

“What happened?”

He took a few seconds to order his thoughts and emotions before he answered.

“We’re not sure yet, the place was ransacked, the b—,” he took a long breath in. “The bodies,” he said his throat tight. “Were mauled. Werewolves.”

“Was there any DNA?” I asked.

“I made a request with the Brotherhood to get their detectives and forensic team. I don’t have the contacts with the local police to be able to handle things here otherwise,” Michael said.

“The Brotherhood hasn’t responded yet,” said Darren.

“I never relied on the Brotherhood for this, I have my own team. If you want me to send them, I will,” I said.

“We’ll take it,” said Darren right away.

Michael hesitated a little. “Thank you, that could make a huge difference.”

“But we won’t have access to the brotherhood’s database,” said Darren.

“We have our own private database, I also know a few other packs who have their own too and would let us run it. As for the Brotherhood’s, we can ask Boisclair. They have difficulty refusing him.”

“Would he do that?” asked Michael a little surprised.

“Yes,” both Darren and I said.

“That,” he began. “Is a lot more resources than I’m used to.”

“Anything else about the crime scene?” I asked.

“I have a few guys that documented everything,” Michael answered. “It was a mess, but it said nothing more than what we know?”

“Did they take anything?” I asked.

"We found nothing missing."

"Didn't Elaeya said they protected something?" Darren said.

I nodded.

"Who's Elaeya?" asked Michael.

Darren pursed his lips, unsure of what he could say.

"Someone who is not limited by distance or timelines," I said.

Michael blinked.

"And you will keep that to yourself," I told him.

"Of course," he replied.

"Where's Eva by the way?" I asked.

"Here," said Darren, moving the camera to show me a couch in an office with Eva sleeping on it, mouth agape. "She's been hit by jet-lagged pretty hard."

I nodded as I typed an email to Brandon.

They both waited for me.

"Okay," I said back on the conversation at hand. "The next step would be to find what they were protecting. It might give us a clue. It could also be at risk of a second attempt. So we have to make sure it's safe."

My computer pinged. Brandon had answered.

"Okay, the forensic team should be at Stonewillow in eight hours, there will be five people plus equipment, so I'm counting on you to prepare accommodations for all of them."

"Of course," said Michael, a little taken aback by the speed of the response.

"Do you have enough security?" I asked.

"Yes. I will inform you if there is a change in the situation," said Darren. He was really starting to grow into a pretty decent Gamma.

"How has been your transfer of power?" I asked Michael.

"My father was pretty reticent of letting go. But this," he paused. "Hit him hard. I think he never really digested Darren leaving. But that… My mother took charge of the rest of the transfer. Legally everything is mine. We will do the transfer of Alpha around the time of the funerals."

I nodded. "Good. No disrespect, but I prefer dealing with you than your father."

"Yeah, well, me too," Michael said.

Darren snorted. “Don’t we all?”

“Has Darren filled you in on the upcoming wars?” I asked.

“Yes. That was coming from your psychic too?”

“Yes. We know war one is going to be triggered by what just happened in Stonewillow. We don’t know about the others. You might not be involved in those, but I’m of the mindset to not take stupid chances.”

“Of course. You tell us what you need,” Michael said.

“First off, information. As much as possible. I’d prefer not to start another war with an overly ambitious, and misguided, pack. I just dealt with one, and the Brotherhood are not happy. But if it has to happen, then it will,” I said.

“With all due respect, why?” asked Michael. “This is not your fight, or your territory, we’re not even officially allies. This isn’t even on your continent. Why do this if it’s inconvenient and would cause you trouble.”

“Firstly, my Gammas are probably going to be there helping regardless. I’d prefer making sure they return in a timely manner. Secondly, someone really wise said I would be involved right away, and I learned not to ignore clever people’s opinion. And finally, are you asking for help?”

“Eh?” he asked a little confused.

“Just say yes,” said Darren.

“Erm, yes,” said Michael still unclear on what was happening.

“I have not refused help to anyone who has genuinely asked, without ulterior motives, or cause for distrust.”

“Oh, erm, thank you.”

“This makes it official,” said Darren. “Anyone asked. You contacted Blakemore for help.”

“Oh, okay. I get it.”

I nodded. “Is there anything else you want to cover?” I asked them.

Darren shook his head. “I’m working with Dimitri to secure the border, gather intel, and make sure those fuckers don’t come back.”

“What if they never left?” I asked.

“This is a terrifying thought,” Darren said.

“I’m already making a full census to make sure everyone is both accounted for, and no strangers are among us,” said Michael. “I’m also having someone looking at all the security cameras and talking to everyone to account for any visitor and spot any discrepancy.”

“Good. That would be one of the first things I would do too,” I said.

Michael shook his head in a sigh. “How do you keep your people safe from something like this?” he asked no one in particular.

“Preparation, knowledge, resources, alliances, plenty of out of the box ideas, and a good dose of paranoia,” I said.

Darren snorted.

“I’m not even sure where to start,” Michael said.

“Always start with knowledge. Who are your enemies, who are your allies? What is the security on your territory, what could be done better, and what is its weakness? Who is trustworthy within your pack and what are the weak links? What are your resources, financial, military, everything? What are your resources from outside your pack and from allies? If there would be a war, who would fight it, who will stay by your side, who is a liability, and who will cause more harm than good, even if well-intentioned? Who are your best counsel and get them involved in this process where they excel at?

One that initial intel is on the table or on its way. You secure everything further, to stabilise, or at least buy some time. Then you start listing your issues and put them on a scale of priorities based on a schedule. What can wait, and what can’t, and how long do you have?

Preparation is generally done before hand to its biggest extent. You can prepare what you need in the here and now, but you will also have to establish all that you will have to prepare and do to make sure this doesn’t repeat itself.

I guess, this is a start, then you can move up from there.”

Darren was slouched on his chair, his arms crossed, his eyes not as bright as they were at the beginning of the call, probably feeling the jet lag as much as Eva, but he was listening and nodding to a few points along the way.

Michael looked like I’d just dumped the weight of the world on his shoulder.

“Give yourself some time, deal with the emergencies first,” I said. “Don’t focus on more than you need or it’ll render you insane. You should be reasonably paranoiac, not obsessively so.”

Michael nodded and thought about it some more.

Darren got up to check on Eva.

“You’ve protected a lot of pack, right?”

“Sure, but there is always a limit to what can be done independently.”

“Independently?”

"Without absorbing the pack," I said. "From a remote standpoint, I can do some in the here and now, but when it comes to long terms, I'm more limited. Allies works well to gather intel. If you're lucky then might even give you a tip about something that might be coming your way. But when it comes to actions, allies have a more reactionary position. I can be truly proactive only within my own pack. It's up to you to shoulder that part alone."

"Do all the packs you fused with were just absorbed. Eva said you had independent pack under you."

"They are not fully independent. You could see Blakemore as a country, and my packs as provinces, or states, or cantons. However you want to divide them. Some things are under their own jurisdiction and other tightly controlled by Blakemore. But all are acting as a single entity."

He nodded. "Do you have territories not connected to yours? I mean, physically adjoining the others?"

"No. Not that it has never happened within packs, but it's not really encouraged under the Moonhunter Brotherhood. Technologies has made it easier to operate remotely anything, but it has its level of difficulty and not many packs could handle it. Most previous independent territories were generally for a temporary transitory period, otherwise those packs would often just lose them, eventually. Only a pretty solid pack could handle this on the long term, but the Brotherhood is pretty nervous about this type of expansion. It opened the door for conquerors, which they're always been against since the first days of the Brotherhood."

"Have you ever considered it?"

"Twice, but it never came to be," I said. "I've taken over remotely once a territory, but it was for a transition of power—a temporary situation. But with the present climate with the Brotherhood, I doubt they'll ask me again."

He nodded.

I heard snoring from my laptop. Michael heard it too and looked sideways at where the couch is.

"I guess it's time for the call to end," I told him.

"Yes, and thank you."

"Don't thank me yet. You're far from out of the woods."

— Chapter Fifty-One —

TIME CHANGES

— Kaden —

“Hey there,” I said to my mother.

“Hey, how are you doing?” she asked me as she kissed my cheeks. “What brings you here?”

“I’m fine, and I’d like to talk to Jasmine.”

I was in my parent’s house. They’ve been living here for over a decade and a half now. It’s one of the biggest house on the Blakemore packhouse land, other than the actual packhouse, but it was slowly growing empty.

I’ve never actually lived here, as I left home when we still lived in the packhouse, but Eva as left now that she has her mate and has a house near Blakeden. And now Jasmine will soon leave too, only for much farther than Eva and I did.

There was a bit of melancholia in my mother’s features today. There was Jasmine imminent departure lurking in the horizon, but there was also the tragedy at Stonewillow. I know my parents have grown really fond of Darren. My mother in particular made a lot of efforts to make him feel at home. She knows better than any of us what it is to leave your home and family for a mate.

“She’s upstairs,” she told me. “You’ll talk to her about her mate?”

“I haven’t had a chance to get to hear her side on this yet.”

She nodded, then sharply grabbed at my shoulder and twisted me around, her eyes wide.

It took me a second to realise what was going on, then I just let her.

“That’s a mark, Kade. An actual mark,” she said looking at my neck.

“I know,” I said.

“You marked her?”

“Obviously.”

She hugged me, I indulged her.

“What about the rest?” she asked grabbing me by the shoulders.

“Are you really asking about my sex life?” I grimaced.

She gave me an unamused look.

"Yeah, it's all done," I conceded.

She squealed in delight. "We have to celebrate this."

"Maybe not now," I said. "And it could be a little insensitive to Eva and Darren."

"Of course," she said sobering up.

"I'll check on Jasmine," I said.

"She's really been all over the place lately, she will need to get on track if she wants this to work out."

"I figured."

I found Jasmine in her bedroom.

"Hey, can I talk to you for a minute?" I said peeking my head around the door of her bedroom. It was heavily decorated, and there were piles of discarded clothes on one of the chairs. Given that the domestics cleans every day, it's the mess of the day.

"No," she said looking away.

"And why is that?" I asked, leaning my shoulder on her doorframe. Good thing the doors are really high in this house or I'd have to dock every time I go through a doorway. Most of the buildings on packland were this way. I'm not the first tall man in this family.

I crossed my arms.

"I know you're the one who told him to leave," she said.

She was sitting on her bed with her legs crossed, looking at her phone.

"I didn't order him. He's an Alpha, he can do whatever he pleases."

"You know what I mean," she said. "You 'suggested'," she did air quotes with her fingers. "For him to leave, and he really likes you, and respects you, so, of course, he'd leave."

"There are businesses that needs taking care of,"

"Business," she spat. "Is that all you want to talk about?"

"Have the two of you talked yet?"

"You're changing the subject."

I quirked an eyebrow at her.

I moved inside the room. Most of her chairs were covered in something, so I dumbed a pile of dresses on top of what was on another chair and took the cleared chair in front of her bed, flipped it around and straddled it, with my arms on the backrest.

“There are a few things that need to be cleared up before this conversation devolve any further,” I said. “Firstly, I care about plenty of things other than business, and that includes you and your well-being, so don’t be a bitch about this, because you have no idea the length I go to for you, this family, and this pack.”

She closed her mouth suddenly ashamed and looked away.

“Secondly, Jean-Philippe is a free agent, and I don’t control him. I gave him facts, he asked for recommendations which I gave, but he could ignore anything he wanted. Ultimately he made his decision, and a large part of this decision was for you, more than himself.”

She snapped her eyes back to me, but I didn’t let her question me yet.

“Thirdly, your sister and brother-in-law are dealing with the murder of two family members at the dawn of a war, and you get pissed about not seeing your new boyfriend for a few weeks. The world does not revolve around you Jasmine.”

“I know this,” she muttered.

“And I know that you know. I know that what is happening here is not you being narcissistic, but you being controlled by your own emotions. That as always been the problem, which leads me to fourthly. Emotions. The mate bond is a powerful thing.”

“Eva and Mom already told me this,” she muttered a little more docile now.

“Well, let me tell you something else that you haven’t heard yet then. It’s a drug and the more you give in to it, the more it drives you, and it takes a while for your body and brain to adapt to this new input.”

She furrowed her brows. “You talk like it’s not even affecting you.”

“It is, and I’m trying to adapt. So is Elaeya, but it requires a lot of discipline and I haven’t always managed to control it.”

“You haven’t?” she asked surprised. I’ve always tried to show an image of someone in control to my little sisters, just like to the rest of the world, the image of someone reliable, and strong. But she’s slowly coming to an age when she needs to know what’s beneath that mask.

“When she was attacked in the hospital, I nearly attack the thing, knowing clearly that Elaeya was between us and could be hurt as collateral, just so I could stop it from getting to her again. I nearly hurt her to try to save her, when she was doing a much better job at saving herself. Mates affect a very irrational part of your brain. It pushes on your instincts, it drives your emotions to a heightened state.”

“And you just understood all this in weeks.”

I smirked. “I talk to a wizard, I cheat,” I said. “He knows a lot of things and help me sort out a lot about mates. In a way, this is a form of magic. An ancient, deep magic. Emotions are one of the

greatest fuels to magic, so as you let your emotions go wild, so does that magic, responding to it accordingly, which makes it harder to control your emotions, which makes it go round and so on, snowballing.

It might sound like not such a terrible thing, as it focuses on a, technically, positive thing—relationship, love—but anything can become too much. It can trigger jealousy, possessiveness, it can make any form of separation difficult if not painful—and do I have to remind you that he's an Alpha, either him or you might have to travel separately given your positions, sooner or later. It can make the highs higher, but it can also make the lows, that much lower.

You have to learn to notice this, and control it. Most people who find their mates young generally see the bond grow slowly which make it easier to learn to deal with it, rather than facing all at once like you just did.

No one is perfect Jass, and everyone loses their shit at least a few times in the beginning, but most people are not dealing with rank. Your wolf is much stronger than your average werewolf and it exacerbates the problem, but your position makes everything you do to be scrutinized, and will lead to consequences far beyond just affecting you and him. Do you understand what I'm trying to say?"

She nodded.

"You've been a mess lately. That little drama show you pulled at the airport, what do you think the other member of Boisclair that saw you think? Do you think there are not rampant rumours about you in Boisclair right now circulating? How do you think it will affect your reception?"

She looked genuinely horrified.

"You have a lot to learn, a lot to master. Jean-Philippe wants you to go home with him."

"I want that too," she said, almost pleading.

I nodded. "I will not force a decision on you. If you want to go, you will."

"But you said I have to stay here."

"Until you're eighteen, which is soon. I don't want to force you anywhere as much as I want to give you time to clear your head until you can make this decision with your eyes open. I will not tell you who to date or marry, or if you should or not. You can go on the other side of the planet if you truly want to. But I want you to know what you're about to get yourself into before you do. I want you to make this decision with your eyes open, and I want you safe and happy once you take the path you choose."

A few tears started to fall on her cheek.

“See what I said with being overemotional. You’ve always had your emotions more on the surface than most. It has made you more passionate, but also more all over the place, and this is triggering your emotions in all new ways. I could have just let you be, but I want to make sure everything will be okay, when I’m not gonna be around to look after you. Boisclair is far from here.”

“I know,” she said. “I’m scared no one will like me there.”

“Well, I know of at least one who does, so it’s not no one.”

She laughed a little in between tears.

“If you want to do this, you will have a lot to learn. Elaeya as been studying all the time to catch up on what will be expected of her, but you already know more than her, you might not have too much practice, but you can dig in there. Mom can help you. Eva was in a similar situation a few years back, and she’s doing pretty well.”

“Everyone thinks Elaeya is perfect, that she’ll be a perfect Luna. No one is thinking this of me. I know she didn’t even know a thing about packs, like a month or two ago, but she’s already perfect, everything is perfect with her. She can even know the future. I’m just-just me.”

“First off, no one is perfect and she struggles too. But she has implemented discipline in her life since she was a toddler because doing otherwise could have led to her death. You have been sheltered and protected all your life. Do you remember one time when you actually realised that it could be different?”

She thought about it. “A few months back, when Eva ended up alone back there. I—,” she hesitated. “You’ve always been the only one to leave for battle, to come back covered in injuries, no one else, but you always came back. It’s just—.”

“It’s just that it never occurred to you that danger could reach further, or reach one of you. And no Devon has been put in danger in Blakemore, or Blakewoods for nearly a century. It’s only outside that this happened. I only got injured outside of our packland. Eva got attacked away from home. And now you’ll be leaving.”

She swallowed.

“There are a lot of things, politically that are happening right now. The position of Blakemore could be changing soon. The biggest safety net that werewolves have had so far was the Moonhunters Brotherhood, but they are struggling and that net is not as solid as it once was. We might have to rely on ourselves a lot more.”

“Haven’t we already been doing that?”

“To an extent, yes. But it could be different. Jean-Philippe is seeing this too, enough to consider making our packs, sisters.”

He eyes widened. “Do people still do that?”

“Rarely. It could solidify things, it could also ostracise us. It’s also why he’s worried about you. What happens with Blakemore, good, or bad, could be reflected on you and any who disapprove could decide to point the finger at you for it. He wants you safe. But that you want to get involved in politic or not, you will be.

Even those who approve of you within Boisclair, they could be expecting you to bring something to the pack, knowledge, expertise, something beyond just this alliance. Do you think you can deliver?”

“Oh, crap,” she said cowering in the corner, wrapping her arms around her legs as the weight of everything suddenly fell on her.

I rose from my chair and went to sit on the side of the bed.

“No one is expecting you to get everything right at first,” I said. “I didn’t say this to make you panic. But you really need to understand what is at stake. You can have resources here to help you, you can have resources at Boisclair too.”

“But I can’t get both at the same time.”

“I think you’re forgetting something important here.”

“What?” she said, trying to reel in the hope that tried to surface.

“This family is fucking rich. We can get you a plane at your disposal as much as you want, but regardless, we’re not even close to the wealth of your boyfriend. There are ways we can do this, from video chats to travelling back and forth, if that is what you want.”

She said nothing, thinking.

“It could be a very difficult thing to do, and it will take time to do it, and patience, but it doesn’t mean you can’t do it. And once you leave here, it doesn’t mean that you’re not part of this family anymore.”

She pressed herself against my back and wrapped her arms around me.

I extended a hand above my shoulder and ruffled her hair.

“Hey, stop that,” she complained. I remember a time when she didn’t care about her hairdo and loved that.

Time changes.

— Chapter Fifty-Two —

EVERYTHING ELSE THAT COULD HAPPEN

— Elaeya —

Kaden had been in his office since five in the morning. I decided I didn't want to eat my breakfast alone in the kitchen so I piled food on a tray and went to see him.

"Mmmh?" I heard from the other side of the door as I knocked.

I went in and moved a few things from the corner of his desk to make space for the tray.

He was talking on the phone, so I let him.

"I'm not sure this is a good idea, no," he said.

"Yes," I said as I arranged the things for the meal.

I saw him look up at me from my peripheral. I had no idea what he was talking about, so I didn't look up to be interrogated, though he doesn't do it as much anymore. He knows I'll tell him if I know anything.

"Alright he said. Forty-eight hours. That's all I'll give you," he said.

The call ended shortly after then.

"Do you know what you made me agree to?" he asked me.

"Not a clue," I said looking up.

He sighed. "There will be a group of Alphas from small packs, a few I've worked with, one that you know," he said.

"Mariqueen?"

"Yes. They're coming here for a, I'm not even sure what. My guess is, complaining about the Brotherhood and ask for the help they're not providing."

I tilted my head sideways focusing on nothing for a second.

"It's like you're a psychic," I said with a smile, confirming his doubt.

"Ah! I knew it. It's starting to happen a little too often now."

He extended his hand to me. I took it. He pulled me closer, but I faltered as a wave of nausea and dizziness hit me along with pressure on my temples.

I landed on Kaden's lap.

“It’s been happening awfully often,” he said. “Maybe we should have the doctor do an early checkup.”

I shook my head, which I regretted instantly. I slumped and closed my eyes as I laid my head on his shoulders. “It won’t change things.”

“We have to check. It could be linked to your injuries.”

“I don’t think it’s medical in nature.”

“Then let’s talk to the wizard.”

I grunted. “He’s working.”

“I can call him back.”

“Let him finish, it’s nothing pressing,” I said looking up as the pressure subsided. “It never last long.”

Kaden didn’t look convinced.

“You should eat something,” I told him.

“So should you.”

He kept me from getting up by keeping one arm around my waist as he moved things aside and got our plates in front of us.

“You should talk to Ylva,” I told him after a few minutes of eating in silence.

“About what?”

“That everything is fine and she can return to work.”

He sighed.

“Do not go, holding a grudge on her,” I told him. “She couldn’t have defended herself from it, even if she wanted to.”

“She could have told me. I could have tried things.”

“Yes, and if there is another situation like this, she will do it.”

“That doesn’t repair what has been broken.”

“Nothing can do that, Kade. All that can be done is to learn from it.”

“You want her to protect you?”

“Yes,” I said. “I think she should.”

“Why?”

I shrugged.

“Of course,” he said. I guess he’s still trying to decipher what of my decisions is based on my own judgment and what is based on insight. But truth to be told, sometimes I’m not even sure myself which is which. The two are too intertwined, too interconnected, and which is cause, and which is effect, is often undecipherable. It’s a bit of a chicken and egg situation.

— Mishka —

“Okay, I want everyone on deck,” said Oskar.

“Aye, Aye, mon capitaine,” I said.

Georges rolled his eyes at me, but his slight grin mitigated the sour look.

We finished the last-minute preparations. There would be thirty-two Alphas and their entourage here in a couple of hours.

The ballroom in the packhouse and been turned in a massive conference room, and the thrones had been taken out of storage. Because yeah, people here have thrones. Plural.

The stories I heard was that Jonathan Devon, Hellhound Senior, had been given a throne by a qilin, for a favour, that everyone has a different story for. Apparently, Johnny Hellhound has a thing for not being consistent with his stories. Anyways, no one knows who carved the throne either. Well, who or what. But it’s a massive Asian-like chair, with gold-embroidered cushions and a massive five feet high backrest with intricate carving made mostly of black jade. The thing is wide enough to sit two or three people.

Since, a few other, more modern, ‘chairs’ were made for all the active Alphas of Blakemore. And whenever there are meeting going through the official channels, the thrones are put on display for their pompous ass to sit upon so that the reception can intimidate anyone stupid enough, to call a meeting through fucking official channels.

Well, you just need to add a big bonfire, a circle of stone menhir, and people half-naked wearing buckskin and doing warrior dances to the songs of growls and howls of wolves, with their skin painted in arcane symbols with blood, in front of all those thrones where sit the ‘royalty’ of werewolf society, to complete the intimidation and make it absolute.

I heard blood sacrifices were a huge thing in those shindigs a millennium or two ago.

I mean, I know we’re supposed to be all civilised now and everything, but getting the massive black thrones with its gold and red cushion, does paint a more arcane picture in my head.

I don’t see people sitting on throne much these days. Most that do, were generally born at least a millennium or two ago.

Anyways, I know it’s a formal thing and everything, and they generally don’t get those out until things are serious, like a trial, or something like that.

I'm not sure what is going on, but it must be serious shit.

As such, I suppose this is not a bad way to set the tone for it.

— Kaden —

I pinched my nose with my thumb and forefinger.

"That is not so simple," I said to the room in general.

"Something as to be done," said Mariqueen. "Nubinero operated for a while, and the Brotherhood did nothing, even when they scaled up last summer, they still made us watch as our people suffered for it."

"They can't act like they used to. They're not equipped for it," said Jayson, my Beta.

"But you did something about it," she said pointing at me. "You're the one they send whenever the situation is too complex or dangerous anyways."

"Our relationship with the Brotherhood at the moment is strained. We've mostly been frenemy for a long time, but things might not be possible to return to the status quo unless something is done for it. And this would not be it," I said. "What you're suggesting is difficult at best in the present situation. I'm about to face another war in so few months. I have resources but even I am limited. Not only this, but the distance between us is making this all the more complicated.

When I intervened with Nubinero, I was not involved in everything that I am right now. The level of support you're asking from me is only what I can offer to my own packs. You can't be asking me to do the Brotherhood's job. Not only is it not my responsibility, but it would start a war between them and us, for sure. I do not need this right now, neither additional incentive to demonize us.

You said you need more strength to support you, then fucking grow. Fuse together, become stronger. There is a limit to what small packs can do and you know it. Either you accept it or do something about it."

"We accepted it knowing that the Brotherhood was there to support us," said Alpha Erikson.

"And when was the last time they did that?" I said. No one answered and they were probably calculating how many years, or more realistically decades, it had been since the last serious intervention from the Brotherhood that was more than sending another signatory to deal with the situation on their behalf.

"You're asking me to risk my own people and a war that would shake all wolves in the world for you. This could become the first milestone is shaping our own version of World War I. I will not be the one to start this mess, I will not risk my own people, not like this. You want strength, acquire it. That's the best thing I can tell you right now."

"What if that's what we do?" asked Mariqueen.

The ballroom was packed. All the visiting Alphas were sitting on their own chair in front of a conference table in front of my people and I.

There were only ranked members present and a few key people, but it was already at the limit of what this room could contain. If things continue to evolve this way, we might have to build an extension, or a whole new building for these types of situations.

I just motioned my hand in a way that meant to Mariqueen, 'Well, that's exactly what I just told you to do'.

"That's what had happened before with them isn't it," she said pointing at some of my Alphas.

My stomach sank as I anticipated what she was about to say.

"When they couldn't get help from you, you'd give it if they joined Blakemore."

The whole room erupted in murmurs.

I so did not need that.

"You think I'm withholding support to force you to fuse up?" I asked her.

"Are you?" she asked jutting her chin at me.

I took a long inspiration, praying for patience.

"No, I'm not," I said. "If I wanted to absorb you, I would tell you outright. I thought you would have realised by now that this is how I operate, not through manipulation and blackmail."

She nodded unperturbed. "I just had to be sure," she said.

Sure of what exactly?

"I'm applying Monaweard to join Blakemore," she said.

The room erupted once more.

"With all due respect Mariqueen, your territory is too far to allow efficient collaboration."

"Land is just land. I love mine, but I love my people more. I will sacrifice my territory if it means saving my pack."

There were a lot of heads close together, discussing frantically, and not all of them looked displeased at the idea. Which could mean escalation.

In another time, I would not have bothered that much and maybe have gone along with it, but now, now I'm fucking worried. Stonewillow, the Brotherhood, Boisclair, the three wars, and Elaeya. It's like all the pieces were getting in place for a perfect storm, and I kept looking around for what could be the trigger. I don't know if it'll explode, or build up, maybe pass by. I don't know. What worried me, most of all, was in what direction it will go. I'm facing too many damn unknowns, and things are starting to hit too close to home for my own comfort.

The attack on Ghealach affected my sister, now my brother-in-law's old pack is suffering, and everything else that could happen…

I've never hesitated this much before. In the past, I would have just jumped into the fray. And I noticed Jayson noticing this too.

Something changed.

My phone notified me of a text message.

I looked.

It was, what I assumed, the source of that change.

I opened Elaeya's text.

Listen to them

Well, I sighed, fuck.

— Chapter Fifty-Three —

AT A CROSSROAD

— Elaeya —

Shea and I were in Kaden's grandparent's quarter in the packhouse. She had assured me, when they would be done, this is where the guys would come.

"So you're like some sort of precog?" Jonathan, Kaden's grandfather, asked me. I don't know where he heard that, but it was useless to refute it.

"No, not exactly, but I can get some insights," I said.

"Dandy," he said while drinking his scotch.

Celia, Kaden's grandmother, was absolutely charming. I've never had grandparents myself, and it was quite a novel concept.

She had given Shea and I a fruity, creamy drink that tasted absolutely great, but I barely touched it, remembering what alcohol did to me last time, and I let Shea and Celia drink together.

We heard the voices before they arrived. They were talking quite animatedly.

"Hey there boys," said Celia greeting the men as they arrived.

She was wearing a beautiful maxi dress in shades of dark forest green. She had traits that made me think of indigenous American First Nations. She moved like she always made sure every movement was as it should be.

She brought a tray of beers, and they all grabbed one.

There was Kaden and his father, of course, but also Jayson, Nathan, who was Blakemore's other Gamma, and a couple more men I'd never seen that Shea said would be some of Kaden's Alphas.

Kaden dropped on the couch next to me.

"It's way too late, you should be in bed," he said his voice low as he bent to kiss me.

I recoiled and quirked an eyebrow at him unamused.

He raised his fingers up, giving up.

As I'm not controlling his schedule, I don't see why he should be controlling mine.

I bent upwards and kissed him. He tasted of the bitterness of beer.

Shae had told me than in the aftermath of an important meeting like this, a few of them would reunite while everything was fresh to their mind and do a post-mortem that would last way into the night.

They mostly talked politics. They mentioned the possibility of adding small packs to Blakemore. Kaden seemed uncomfortable with this idea, but I have come to know that this was somewhat relatively common practice here and I don't understand the difference with it now.

I looked at him questioningly.

"Later," he muttered, acknowledging my question.

"It's not the first time this has happened," said Jayson. "Every time there's chaos or conflicts somewhere, there are a bunch of packs seeking protection. But the Brotherhood is not as hands on as they used to be. The last century, they've been sending more and more signatories to deal with messes for them. I don't think their own forces have increased in numbers in what—?"

"At least since the sixties," confirmed Jonathan.

"We've been one of the most involved packs to compensate for this. So what do you think happens when the Brotherhood doesn't answer their calls fast enough?" Jayson continued.

"They call the one who's used to do the work," said Nathan.

"Well, we've answered a lot of calls ourselves in the past fifty years, so pack are getting used to the idea that if shit is hitting the fan, Blakemore can handle it," said Sebastian.

"Yeah, but we generally notify the Brotherhood and get their approval. Now this is bypassing them altogether," Kaden said.

"Don't tell me you've been giving them a lot of curtesy calls because you barely make sure they know what's been going on with us," said Sebastian.

"It's not like it's the first time the Brotherhood is unhappy at Blakemore," said William, the Alpha of Wulfwick.

"I know that," said Kaden. "But things could change to worse very quickly."

"It will," I said.

They all tuned to me.

"The Brotherhood is at a crossroad," I said.

"A crossroad for what?" asked Jonathan.

"Death or rebirth."

"What does that mean," he asked.

I shook my head. "I don't know."

“How do you know that?” asked Travis, the Alpha of Wendunon.

I hesitated. I was not used to being open about this.

“She just knows things,” said Sebastian dismissively.

“That doesn’t sound good though,” said Celia.

Kaden’s brows furrowed.

“Stop trying to take them into account,” I told him.

The look he gave me made it clear that he never truly did this before. He was readjusting everything for me.

“I will be fine,” I told him. “Do what you have to do.”

“Are you sure of this?” he asked. Our voices were low, this conversation between the two of us.

I intertwined the fingers of both of my hands between his and gave him a slight smile in what I hoped would be a reassuring way.

The others continued their conversation without us.

Kaden took a long inspiration then nodded to me.

“I just don’t want a repeat of what happened in the hospital.”

“What has to happen will happen, and what has to be done will be done,” I told him.

He gave me a kiss on the forehead in response.

“I think you’re ready to go through the Luna ceremony,” told me Shea, which snapped Kaden and I out of our bubble.

I frowned.

“What does this tell you?” Kaden asked me noticing my reaction.

“That something is missing,” I said, not knowing what it was.

Shae clapped her hands together in excitement, which stopped all the conversations going on in the room and focus everyone’s attention on her.

“Of course something is missing,” she said. “There is no better way to back a Luna ceremony than with a marriage.”

Kaden and I turned into stoic statues, or eyes fixed on her.

I had mentioned to Kaden that I knew we would marry someday, so this was no surprise to either of us, but I supposed neither of us had considered it in such a sort amount of time.

I tried to think if this was what was missing, but I had no idea.

“Well, it’ll be about time someone rail him in, officially,” said Nathan smugly as he put both of his elbows on the back rest on either side of him.

Kaden gave him a look, but it didn’t seem to be as effective as it usually was.

A couple of guys snickered, but it died down as quickly as they saw Kaden’s face.

“It’s the best way to tackle this. It’s the best way to support your position and make sure no one question your status,” Shae told me.

“Is it?”

“Sure,” she said.

“It’s the most solid approach to take,” said Jayson. “I mean, given your position, no one could question you if both happens in rapid succession.”

“Common Kade,” said Shae. “It’s not like you’re not already head over heal for her. You wouldn’t be considering making her Luna if it was not serious.”

“You don’t have to push for it to happen now,” said Sebastian.

“Like you’re one to talk, you asked me to marry you two days after we met.”

One of the guys laughed and choked on his beer.

Sebastian returned to drinking his beer. Jonathan sipped on his whiskey, looking at the whole scene with mirth.

“You don’t have to rush anything, sweetie,” said Celia. “But it would indeed make a lot of things easier.”

Shae slapped her thigh. “Don’t you have visions about your future? Like if you get married and have children.”

I nodded.

“Which?”

“Both,” I said.

“Here,” she said at her son.

“I know that already,” he told her.

“Then what’s the problem?”

“There’s no problem, I just haven’t taken this into account.” He rubbed his face with his free hand. “It’s not like I have a ton of time on my hands lately to plan a wedding.”

“Who said you’d have to do that yourself. I could have one ready for you in a month, and you would not even have to do anything about it but to show up on time.”

* * * * *

“You don’t have to agree to anything if you don’t want to,” Kaden told me as we prepared for bed.

“Why?” I asked. “Is it because you don’t want to?”

“What? No, it’s just… I guess things keep getting faster than I’m prepared for.”

“They are.” I wrapped my arms around his waist.

“But I guess you’re already familiar with our marriage.”

“Some.”

He put his arms around me and kissed my forehead.

“It’s not like I was not expecting this to eventually happen.” He looked at me. “I just want to be sure you’re saying yes because you want to and not because my mother is bullying you to it, or because of your visions.”

“Do you?” I asked him.

He shrugged. “I didn’t plan to ask, at the moment,” he said truthfully. “But I don’t imagine anyone else with me.” He put his shin on top of my head. “And I can’t say that since you’ve talked about pups that this hasn’t been in my mind.”

“I’m not sure if I would go as fast for children, though,” I said.

He chuckled. “I’d prefer to get those wars out of the way first.”

“Me too.”

He looked back at me. “Well, I guess I better find you a proper ring or my mother is gonna rip my head off.”

“She would,” I said with certainty.

“Right, let’s not talk about my mother right now, and focus on better things.”

“Like what?”

“Like getting you properly naked,” he said. He grabbed me by the waist and lifted me up.

I squealed in surprised and he dropped me on the bed.

He took his shirt off, moved atop me, and began taking every pieces off faster than I could keep up with. Which made me giggle.

I tried to put my hands on him, but he didn’t let me, he flipped me on my front and pinned my hands under one of his. So I did the only thing left for me to do and pressed my hips against him.

Things devolved from there.

The sun was rising as we finally settle for sleep.

I had my head against his chest and I let my finger draw every line of his muscles.

He had his eyes closed and mine were too, when I noticed something.

“Kade?” I raised my head.

He stirred. “Mmmh?” he asked

I put my hand against his heart, closed my eyes and tilted my head in concentration.

“I think you’re healed,” I said.

“Great,” he said sleepily as he circled his arms around me and dragged me back down.

We fell asleep not long after in our mutual embrace.

* * * * *

We woke up just before noon.

Luckily, no urgent calls interrupted our sleep so that we could get enough to tackle the day.

We didn’t linger in bed long.

I moved to the bathroom to get a shower and Kaden went to the bedroom door to get dressed in his bedroom.

I heard a crack and turned around to see the bedroom door’s hinged half-torn from the wood. The upper one was the only one still holding on.

“What happened,” I asked as I came to check.

“I have no idea,” he said checking at the state of the hinges. “There’s no rust. The doorframe’s wood is in good condition.”

The hold of the upper hinge looked precarious at best. He gave a light tug on the door and it came right off. He took it from each side and placed it against the wall.

“I’ll call someone to have it repaired,” he said still looking confused at it.

There was now a gaping hole in place of a door and I realised how naked I was.

I didn’t expect to be seen, but we were not completely alone in this house either. I grabbed one of the sheets and wrapped it around me. At least Kaden had his pants on.

“Maybe you should just move to my room anyways,” he told me.

I looked up at him.

“There’s more closet space, at least,” he said jutting his chin at my boxes of clothes on the floor.

“Is there?”

“I moved out of the packhouse when I was seventeen. My mother was not keen on the idea, but saying that I knew I had a mate was the best argument I had. She insisted in getting the house ready for you, though. It was her condition for letting me leave early. She had a whole bedroom turned into a closet and dressing room. It’s been collecting dust since.”

“Oh,” I said.

“What do you say?” he bent to kiss me.

“Sure,” I said.

“I’ll tell Mrs. Raynolds to move your stuff,” he said, and he left to get dressed.

I looked at the bare doorframe.

This felt odd, but a building headache took my mind off it and I decided to move to the bathroom. Showers always helped.

— Chapter Fifty-Four —

THOSE THINGS KEEP SNEAKING UP ON ME

— Kaden —

There were a few dozen Alphas waiting in the packhouse that I had to deal with. I moved my ass to the door to go and do my job, when Elaeya rushed down the stairs.

“What’s going on?” I asked her.

“I’m coming,” she said.

I didn’t ask ‘why’, I just looked at her sideways.

She shrugged.

I guess this was becoming our routine now. So I just extended my arm to her.

She wrapped hers in the crook of mine and beamed, as we walked to the packhouse.

Everyone was already in the ballroom, around the conference table, arguing animatedly.

It took half a minute for them to realize we had just walked in.

The conversations died down as they looked at me, and all eyes shifted slowly to Elaeya.

She just had that kind of effect on people.

“Okay,” I said, drawing some of the looks back to me. “Has anything happened while I was away?”

Looking at them, I’d say yes.

“Mariqueen,” I beckoned her, and I walked to a small room in the gallery upstairs.

She followed us in silence.

There were a few big chairs, I guided Elaeya to one, and dragged another next to hers. I signed at Mariqueen to sit in the one in front of us.

She inclined her head to Elaeya who inclined hers back.

“How are you doing in Blakemore?” Mariqueen asked her.

“Very well, thank you,” said Elaeya

I sat down.

“Okay,” Mariqueen turned to me. “What is it?”

“Are you still keen on joining Blakemore?” I asked her.

“Do you know how many smaller packs have been destroyed or taken over in the last years?” she asked me.

“A dozen, maybe.”

“At least four times that,” she said.

My eyebrows went up.

“Do you know how many medium size packs got attacked?”

“I’m guessing, more than I know of.”

“Probably,” she said. “And that list could have been longer, on both accounts if it hadn’t been for the intervention of a few. Of all the interventions made in the last year, only two came directly from the Brotherhood, and half came from you. This as set a very clear message.

If it hadn’t been for your intervention last summer, I’m not even sure if my pack would still exist today. The average pack is a lot bigger now than it ever was before, and this is not just because of population inflation, but because it’s safer this way. I will not watch as my people suffer.

I always told myself I would not give my power away to anyone, especially not a man. I never made my husband Alpha, for that very reason. But my ego and my pride is not as important as my pack. I know that I’m too small to keep my pack within Blakemore. That I’ll probably be just a few more people added to an existing pack. I won’t stop taking care of them, but I know I will have to forgo title and power for this.

I’m ready to do it. We’ll move here, rebuild. We’ll do what as to be done, but we won’t be one to be crushed under another’s ambition.”

I nodded and sank into my chair, thinking.

“I’m not the only one, you know,” she said.

“The only one what?” I asked.

“Who wants to join.”

I frowned. “How many?”

“A few, at least.”

“There will be more,” Elaeya said.

We both looked at her.

“How many?” I asked her.

She shook her head. “Some will need more time, but you won’t have the territory for them all.”

That *would* be a lot.

“How do you know?” asked Mariqueen, looking at her intently.

I shook my hand dismissively at her. “Not the territory for it could be an issue. I can’t handle a small population from a distance. It would require a large one to be viable and safe enough. If we need to migrate multiple packs, there will be need to rethink this whole issue, but I will need numbers, exact number.”

“They will listen to you,” Elaeya told Mariqueen. “You will talk to them. When the time will come, Blakemore will be ready.”

Mariqueen’s eyes were no more than slits now, looking at Elaeya very attentively.

Elaeya made no move, and gave no sign, but I felt it. She was getting another headache. A strong one.

“Well,” I said raising up. “I guess this wraps it up for now.”

Both women rose in turn, and Mariqueen seemed a little at a loss for how abrupt this meeting ended. I gave my arm to Elaeya and walk her through the other door at the end of the room and out.

We marched away from the ballroom wing and didn’t speak until I was sure we were out of earshot.

“How is your head?” I asked her.

“Killing me.”

“I’m getting us to the hospital.”

“It won’t change anything, it’s not medical,” she said.

When we reached one of the drawing room, I guided her to one of the couches, where she lay down and put her hand over her face.

“What about medication?” I asked.

“Changes nothing.”

I withheld a growl of frustration. She didn’t need an outburst from me right now.

I took my phone out and called the wizard.

“Yellow,” Alik answered.

“I need magical advice,” I told him.

“Of course you do,” he muttered. “What can I do for you?” he asked louder.

“Elaeya has frequent powerful headaches since the Other’s attack. She says it’s not medical in nature.”

“Huh?” he thought for a few seconds.

“Anything you know can do that. Is it linked to the attack?”

“I don’t know,” he said.

“How come?”

“I need more information. I’d need to see her.”

“Then come and see her.”

“Sure, but not now.”

“Why?”

“Can’t.” There was some more silence, and I heard a few things being shuffled around on the other end of the line.

“You know I’ll pay you for it.”

“Sure, it’s just that I’m in the middle of something.”

“Can’t it wait?” I asked.

“There would be a big boom if I do that.”

“A what?”

“An explosion. You can’t interrupt magic, however, you want man. It’s like chemistry, if you mix things wrong or don’t finish things properly, you can make a bad reaction happen.” There was movement and I heard him curse. “Look, I’m all for helping you and it’s pretty much what I’m doing right now and it’s a doozy, I can’t leave now, it’s going to take most of the day and night, and I’m probably going to drop in a coma after. I’ll come and check on her headaches the moment I’m vertical, but right now, if you don’t stop interrupting the wizard, you’re going to end up with lousy spells.” He hung up on me.

I looked at my phone.

I kinda wanted to punch him in the face, but he was also working his ass off for me, so I guess I wasn’t in any position to really complain. Waiting was probably better than a big crater somewhere on my land.

I looked at Elaeya and my heart sank.

“Is there anything I can do?” I asked her.

“Just give me time,” she replied.

Everyone is just asking for time, and I'm not the most patient of men.

"I'll be back," I told her.

I went back to the ballroom.

"Okay, Lady, gentlemen, that will be enough for now. I heard you, I'll see what I can do, and you also have decisions to make yourself. I'm actually pretty busy right now, so I will wait for updates, but that will be all for today. Actually, for the week. I will arrange for transportation in the incoming hours and will have someone help to book your flights. Now if you excuse me, I have other fires to put out."

I left the room and gave a call to Brandon to organize their departure.

Then I called Eva.

"Tell me things are going well," I told her the second she answered.

"As well as can be, given the situation," she said, her voice exuding tiredness. "How bad are things?"

I guess I was a little transparent there.

"Could be better," I said. "Any security breach?"

"Nope. Everything's been quiet on the front. The forensic team is nearly done. The funeral over. Michael is officially Alpha. We're still looking for what they could have been after though."

"Okay, good. Take care of yourself Eva."

She paused for a second. "I will, you too."

"I will," I said and ended the conversation.

I went back to check on Elaeya.

She still hadn't moved. So I went to pick her up.

"What are you doing?" she asked me.

"I'm going to put you to bed."

"I'm not tired."

"You haven't moved from the couch," I pointed.

"That doesn't mean tiredness. It'll pass, it always does."

We didn't argue long after that, but I did get us back home.

There was fewer chances of us being interrupted there than in the packhouse.

She did seem to get better though. So I took my laptop and sat on the couch to look at what my options were for expansion.

Again.

I thought I wouldn't expend for a while, but those things keep sneaking up on me.

I mean that most packs have to work to expand, but in the last few years, I'd say it's nearly more work to limit expansion than to just go with the flow.

Mom came a little later and sat next to Elaeya to ask questions about the wedding.

I didn't interrupt, but I did contact a jeweler by email to start working on a ring. My mother said it would happen in a month, and I'm absolutely convinced she can pull this off, so I'd better get my ass into gears now while I can.

As dinner time came, the two women were nowhere to be seen.

I tracked my mother's smell near the door so she was probably gone, Elaeya was upstairs.

Mrs. Raynolds and Sabrina, her help, had moved all of Elaeya's things to my room already, as I saw none of them in her room, but I heard the shower, so I checked the bathroom.

Elaeya was sitting at the bottom of the shower, still dressed, completely wet and rocking backwards and forwards, with her arms around her knees.

"Ela?" I said as I got closer to eye level with her. "What's going on?"

She sounded like she was mumbling something I could not understand.

"I'm losing my mind," she said. She put her hand on her head and her face between her knees. "Something is wrong with me."

— Chapter Fifty-Five —

DO ENLIGHTEN ME

— Alik —

It took me a while to take care of everything and then get back on my feet after.

When I knocked on the door of the Alpha's home, daylight was already in its decline. The days were shorter now, the darkness came faster every single night. After the winds of yesterday, there was nearly no leaves left in the trees—even though the land of the packhouse had been cleared of most of its leaves—leaving only the one that fell down in the last few hours. I suppose an army of groundskeepers can do that.

The maid guided me upstairs.

I passed by a carpenter who was repairing a door that had been ripped from its doorframe.

What kind of crap is going on here?

I found the Hellhound in his bedroom, sitting on a chair with his laptop on his lap. Elaeya was sleeping under the covers.

He closed the laptop as I came in and gestured at her. He didn't look like a man simply worried about his girlfriend's migraine.

"What happened?"

"It kept getting worse, more frequent. I found her yesterday in the shower saying that she was going crazy."

"In the shower?"

"She said it's the only thing that truly helps."

"Huh?" I sat on the bed next to her and waved my hands slowly over her, extending my senses to connect with her aura. It was normal. I found no wounds, no sign of external attacks. "Huh?" I said again.

I put my hands on either side of her head and closed my eyes, reopening them slowly, focussing on magical energy.

I could see the colours of her aura, they were agitated, but she was not dreaming either. I don't think she's even sleeping.

"What else has she said?"

He thought about it for a bit. "That there was a buzzing in her head."

“Did she mention voices?”

“Voices?” he said, his voice was probably the most shaken I’d heard it since I met him. “You think it’s schizophrenia?”

“What? No,” I said, dropping my hands and looking behind my shoulder at him. “Her mind his fine.”

“That’s not what she said.”

“It’s under stress,” I said resuming my assessment. “But it’s not from mental illness, or an external attack, or magic.”

“What is it then?”

I got up and rubbed my hands on my pants. Doing this always gave me the tingles and it was damn annoying. I let my eyes go back to normal before I grew a headache, and grabbed a chair that I dragged next to the bed, in front of his for a better conversation.

“First, I need more information. I need to know the trigger.”

“What trigger?”

“When was the first time, her or you noticed those headaches?”

“A little after the attack.”

“How long after?”

“Maybe a week. Give or take.”

I rubbed my hand over my stubble, trying to find something that would make all the pieces of the puzzle click together.

“Did something else happen around that time?”

“There’s always a million things that happen around here, but I’m not sure anything relevant happened.”

I nodded pensively

“What do you know?” he asked me.

“A lot of minute details that make no sense,” I said. “Yet.”

“Like what?”

“I’m not even sure I can put them all to words yet,” I said. But he probably knew something of importance that he didn’t think was important, and maybe brainstorming would trigger something.

“She’s not sleeping.” It was probably the information I was the surest about.

"Is it a coma then?"

I didn't have the hearing of a werewolf, so I couldn't say if his heartbeat went up, but his chest rose and fell more rapidly now. He kept his face an impassive mask, but I didn't need to look at his aura to know that the idea was disturbing him.

"No. I think she put herself into that state."

"How and why?"

"You can consider this a bit similar to an extreme meditative state. She pretty much locked herself inside her own mind."

"But why?" he asked confused.

"Because she fighting something?"

"You said she was not under attack."

"She isn't."

"This doesn't make sense."

"I told you it didn't. I need more information to understand what's going on."

He thought in silence.

"What about her mother?" I asked. "Maybe she has knowledge about what is going on?"

"She came in this morning," he said. "She checked her for a while, then rushed out and I hadn't had any news from her yet?"

"Huh?"

"I don't get why she did that or where she is?"

"My guess is that she's unsure of what is going on and she went to get knowledge."

"Where?"

"Probably something similar to this," I said pointing at Elaeya. "She's probably using her gifts, though she could also be summoning something for interrogations. What do I know?"

"This is linked to her gifts?" he asked me.

I thought about it.

"I don't know if it's linked," I said slowly. "But she's using it now."

"What could it be linked to then?"

I shrugged. "Something that most probably happened recently," I said. "How long have you been with her?"

"A couple of months."

"So it's recent. Did you know her before then?"

"No."

"Lucky you were still single. I thought most Alpha tried to settle as early as possible."

"Most, but I knew she was out there."

"What do you mean?"

He rubbed his hand over his face and let his head fall back for a moment, before he looked back at me.

"I began sensing her when I was around thirteen. Given our age difference, that's probably around the time of her birth. It would be just a slight pull at first, but it grew with years. I started to have dreams about it. I couldn't say where she was, I wasn't pulled anywhere, I didn't know where she was, or what she looked like. I just knew she existed.

It grew more intense with years. It started to affect me. My mood was harder to control. I got more short-tempered. I stopped sleeping full nights. Looking for her slowly became like an obsession. I tried not to let it take over my life, but there were times when it was pretty damn hard. Then I started to have physical symptoms too. Palpitations, difficulties to breathe, it grew with time to heart attacks. The docs said I was most probably suffering through the separation of a mate. Nothing else made sense, but we never found out why it turned out this way with me, or how I could feel her."

"Did this change when you met her?"

"Yeah. Sleeping was even harder when she was around. She said she made it worse, but it was fine when we slept next to one another. I slept better than I've probably done since I learn of her existence."

"What about the other symptoms?" I asked.

"I haven't had any since."

"What did she say about this?"

"That she had no idea how this happened, but that she knew she was the cause. She said I was injured and it went all the way to my soul. That it was so brittle that a rejection could potentially kill me."

"Do you know the state of this injury now?"

"Yesterday morning she said I was healed."

Yesterday, soul, injuries, connection, mate, mind, vitteraï, something was missing in this equation.

Wait, mate.

“What is the state of your mate bond?”

“Fully forged.”

“When was she made part of your pack?”

“She hasn’t been yet.”

Huh? “Why?”

“She said something was missing.”

“What?”

“My mother assume it was a marriage to solidify her position as Luna.”

“But she’s not Luna yet?”

“No.”

Damn, something’s still missing.

“When did you forge the bond?” I asked.

“Around a week after the attack.”

BINGO!

He probably saw the change in my expression because he asked, “Do you think that’s it? The bond?” he thought for a second. “So she somehow made me sick, and now I’m somehow making her sick?” his eyes widened. “How fucking twisted is that?”

Something else clicked inside my head.

“What happened to the door?” I pointed in the direction of where I saw the carpenter work earlier.

He shook his hand dismissively. “It’s unimportant.”

“Humour me.”

He frowned. “It just broke when I opened it yesterday.”

“Were you rough?”

“Not even close.”

Aha!

I smiled.

The Hellhound looked strangely at me.

"I think I get the gist of what is going on now."

"Well, do enlighten me, because I don't have a freaking clue."

— Chapter Fifty-Six —

HER NATURE VERSUS YOURS

— Alik —

“First thing first, you.”

He quirked a brow at me.

“Vitteraï have this sort of connection to land, far beyond and deeper what most things can. They don’t own any of it in anyways, but their awareness is a link to it. Traditionally, when they get their mates, they make a ceremony with a limited number of potential mates. Once the bond develops later, they both feel it. Or at least, they do if they are both vitteraï as they feel one another through their connection with the land. It’s said that they can be apart and still feel one another’s presence.

But the thing is that this bond,” I pointed at him. “Was not artificially triggered because you’re both werewolves. It came to be naturally, so neither was warned of this. Thus, you could feel her through a connection that goes beyond space and time, but she couldn’t sense you, as you don’t have this connection.

So it triggered your mate bond. Giving you a constant connection to keep triggering it daily, yet going through the separation permanently. Let me ask you something. I heard you became Alpha young, how young was it?”

“I started to take some of the duties around thirteen, but I was made officially Alpha only when I was fifteen.”

I whistled. “That’s young. How come? Your father is still capable, I mean you made him one of your Alphas, right?”

“He got hit by a pretty nasty curse and his health got worse and worse. At some point he nearly bit it. I managed to find ways to gain some time, but it took me years to get rid of that curse. Eventually, he got better and I gave him something to do as he was driving everyone nuts otherwise.” He looked at Elaeya.“It’s all nice and everything to get answers, but shouldn’t we do something about her, if you know what’s going on now?”

“I don’t think I can do something.” I paused and thought furiously.

I dug inside my bag, grabbed a crystal and put in on a leather cord. I then drew a circle on the floor with my erasable marker around me, and muttered a spell. I then went to Elaeya and knotted the improvised necklace around her neck.

“This will take care of it?” he asked me.

“Nope,” I said. “But it will help her. It’s like a seal separating her from the outside world. It will give her an edge in her fight.”

“Why separate her from the outside world? You said she was not under attack.”

“And she isn’t,” I said sitting back down. “I’ll get there.”

He looked strangely at me.

I’m used to this. I’m a wizard, my work is the strange and weird. So obviously, I get that effect on people too.

“So,” I said getting back to my story. “The fact that, one, you were young when this occurred, two, you rose in rank pretty quickly, and three, you’re naturally strong, is what probably save you.”

“What do you mean,” he asked.

“Okay, firstly, a young mind is more malleable. The older we get, the stronger the mind becomes. It’s like if something is trying to force itself inside someone’s mind, it’s harder to do with someone older than younger. At least it’s the rule with everything human or human-ish. The moment something as free will, as what doesn’t, tend to be set in its ways from the get go.

You know how we say old people are stubborn?”

He nodded.

“In part, that’s it. Some of it is age, experience, becoming more jaded, not trusting as easily, you build years of knowledge and exposure to all the ups and downs of life, and this becomes like a shield to protect you. Plus, it goes beyond this, it’s also metaphysical.

By not having this layer of protection, it can reshape you. You know how we say what doesn’t bend breaks. Well, you bent. Kids are freakishly adaptable, and you adapted better than you would have if you’ve been older when this happened. You faced your puberty in that stage. Plus, not only there is your natural predisposition for strength, but the relationship between an Alpha and his pack is beyond just responsibilities. Your pack makes you stronger and vice versa.

That gave you the ammunition to face this challenge. You might have gone insane otherwise, or just died.

But this leads to the next issue. Power.”

I bent down and grabbed a bottle of water from my bag and took a sip.

“Let’s just say that every werewolf has a 100%. It’s like your maximum capacity, power, it’s the magical part of your nature.”

“Magical?” he asked bewildered.

"And you think shifting from human form to wolf form as nothing to do with magic," I asked him incredulously.

He shrugged.

"Right, so what is one person's 100% is not necessarily's the same as another. Genetic is a factor. For example," I pointed my hand at him moving it up to downwards.

He snorted.

"Also, training, skills, knowledge, experience, health, are all things that can shift forwards or backwards a werewolf's 100%. Not unlike muscles. Your peak can change with the state of your health or how much you train."

He nodded.

"Okay, so the theory goes as such. No werewolf can reach his 100% without a mate. There is maybe a 5 to 10% that is inaccessible without it. But once you find your mate, it's there. Which is one of the reasons why you people are so keen on finding and sticking to your mates. But you can't be fully what you could be otherwise—if you were to try to reach your full potential—without one. I think if the mate dies it's on the lower end, but if you're not united, then it's on the higher end.

Now, there is a part, the metaphysical part of you, who connects with one another. When werewolf connects with their mate, and especially forges their bonds, there is part of this latent metaphysical potential that goes beyond that original 100% that comes from the interaction with one another. You can sort of see things in videogame terms as a buff. Depending on your mate, this could be between 10 and 20%, and it will be different from one person to another, reacting in ways that are more relevant to that werewolf.

For example, if your metaphysical abilities translate mostly in physical strength, then your mate will most probably inherit something similar or akin to this. That percentage, though, is when your mate is a werewolf only, hybrids can affect less or even more, and in wilder ways too.

But, separation from a mate, as a cost. If part of the bond had been forged, it would have put a limiter on this, but you didn't, so that cost was little at first, put it grew, and grew, and grew. Most would have kicked the bucket before then, but you lasted abnormally long. So that cost kept growing."

I took another sip from my bottle.

"There is a training some Polynesian warriors do, where it consists of running for long distance in waist-deep water. The resistance of the sea makes it really hard. It's nigh impossible to run fast this way, but by putting such a damper on their abilities in their everyday training, when they finally get out of the water, they haul ass.

In a way, you've had a damper on your abilities nearly all your life. A damper that has been growing with time, and you had to compensate for it, heavily. But as you grew into it, you never really realised it. But you probably had to train twice as hard to reach the same results you would have been satisfied with otherwise. And impressively still, you managed to become a fearsome werewolf regardless, so kudos to you, by the way.

But you found your mate, you forged the bond, and now you're healed. All the dampers are now off. Your true abilities are starting to unleash. Not only that, but your mate is a freaking hybrid vitteraï. You could potentially gain from her a lot more than just a 20% buff. How strong your connection is, your level of trust, all of this will determine the level of effect this has on you, and it can grow with time.

So that door. You broke it. You probably didn't use your muscles more than usual, but the effect is not going to be the same as it was. I would strongly suggest that you don't play rough house with a kid or anything too fragile, or you might inadvertently break it. Give yourself a few months to a year until you really re-learn how to gage both your strengths and abilities."

His eyes had gotten rounder and rounder as I talked, but they now snapped to her.

"Don't worry about her. She's probably the safest from any accident. Your instincts will probably kick in and stop you from doing anything you shouldn't as they kinda perceive her as a part of you, in some ways that is not untrue.

It's like the nerves in your teeth. Your jaw is strong enough to break your teeth by biting too hard. Even without werewolf levels of strength. The nerves are there to make it too painful for you to keep biting until you crush them. You kind of have the same metaphysical mechanism when it comes to her. You'll have to push beyond that threshold to be able to actively hurt her."

"Is it true than killing a mate can kill you?"

"Potentially, yes," I said. "Or at least, cripple you for life. If not physically, then in other ways. Not good ways."

He nodded.

"And what is happening to you is happening to her now," I continued. "At least in part. Only the reaction is not the same."

"The headaches and madness?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said. "The difference is in her nature versus yours." I scratched at my shin. "Back in the days when vitteraï became involved with werewolves—actually, that's what spirit wolf mean, one that has joined a pack—they were generally pure blooded. They would join, some were made Luna—as they could not be made technically female Alpha as they were not werewolves, so they became a sort of spiritual connector in between both worlds.

Now, when they would have children—hybrids—with their Alpha, the child would grow up and not take power for a while, as most werewolves don't pass titles until they've generally beyond their prime. You remember what I said about young minds being more malleable?"

He nodded.

"Well, as you guys have a pretty long lifespan, it would give the child a few decades to build that mental shield. Then, if the child was to take power, the mother would generally take a more spiritual guide type of position. A sort of mix of shaman and spiritual manager for land and entities, and ancestors and the likes. Because the child, now part werewolf, would develop a stronger connection with that specific land, and its people—and doing double duty is a lot harder. So the mother would protect by taking some of that pressure off.

And when that one gets older, he or she takes the same role the mother did for the next in line. Acting as an insulator.

Because here is the thing. Your pack is pretty big, both in people and land. That translates into additional power for you, and your power and strength means a stronger pack and so on."

"It's not as snowballing as you made it sound like, but yeah, there is a correlation between the too."

"Right, and Elaeya is still young. She's not as protected. And she has magic which can trigger things in all sorts of unpredictable ways for her kind.

And your pack is freakishly big, and she didn't have a lot of time to get accustomed to the additional input this gives her. This place probably hasn't interacted with its spiritual counter par in centuries, maybe more. There are entities that needs this. There are probably a lot of things reaching out, and through her link with you, they sense her even more sharply than they usually would.

Things are probably trying to connect with her, some happy to be finally able to talk, others furious of having been ignored for so long. Plus, all that she's getting from the pack itself. Her brain is being assaulted right now and is being overloaded. That's what's happening with her."

"What will happen then?"

"If things continue as is, if she's unlucky she'll either go completely insane or self destruct."

He cringed.

"If she's lucky, she'll learn to forgo all emotion and will discard most of her personality. She'll mostly be a vessel, not much else."

He rubbed both of his hands over his face in exasperation and rested his elbows on his knees.

"So I become stronger and she disappears in the process, and die, one way or another?"

"If nothing is done then yes," I said.

His head perked up. "What can be done?"

"From us, very little. But if her mother is willing to take part of her burden away, then she could function."

He blinked rapidly, straightening up.

"She would need your accord for this."

"I give it," he blurted.

"You don't know what that means yet."

"It doesn't matter."

"It kinda does," I said.

He frowned.

"You would set your pack up for some of the old ways. Some practices that haven't been done in ages."

"What does that means?"

"Well, first it means that you open a channel of communication with things that hasn't connected with mortals in a while. Some will be happy about it, others not. Some might ask for sacrifices once in a while."

"What?"

"Well, it doesn't have to be people, it can just be a chicken. You have some farms here, they kill chicken once in a while for meat, so maybe they do it in a certain place and let the blood flow on the ground, a few words are said and that's it. Blood is a strong currency in the supernatural world. So that makes the entity happy, and you still get to eat the chicken.

They might inform you not to cut a certain tree and get angry if you do, but they can also help out in other ways."

"So it's like adding non-werewolf members to this pack that has different needs and can only talk with vitteraï—,"

"Nearly only," I corrected him.

He nodded. "So some partnership with new creatures and forces that were already there only ignored. So no need for worship or anything like that?"

"You can worship all you want, but faith is a different creature altogether. Different powers and effects. Ancestors worship and animism were strong in the old days, often mixed in with

paganism and a few deities here and there. In some aspect, vitteraï will allow you to tap into this, but for any gain there is a price."

"Like a blood sacrifice, or protecting some trees?"

"Things like that, yes. You don't need to pray, but more to acknowledge and respect them, and they will do the same in return."

"And they stop trying to get to Elaeya to do that for them because someone else is officially assigned to this?"

"In a nutshell, yeah."

"Okay, I can deal with this," he said. His eyes were shifty, he was calculating what this meant.

"So now we have to track her mother," I said.

At that moment, someone knocked on the door and a beautiful white hair woman peeked in.

"I think I may be able to help," she said hesitantly.

"Why, yes you certainly can," I said to her with a smile.

— Chapter Fifty-Seven —

NO MATTER THE DIFFICULTIES, NO MATTER THE PAIN

— Elaeya —

I woke to a pleasant sensation.

Fingers were running up and down the side of my face in light butterflies flutters. I recognized this touch. I opened my eyes with a pleased smile on my lips.

“Hey there, Mama,” I said.

She was lying next to me, on top of the covers.

“Hey there, child mine,” she replied.

I just looked at her, and she did the same, in silence.

“You did something, didn’t you?” I asked after a minute or two.

“I did.”

“Was it difficult?”

“Actually, I am happy to do this.”

“Are you?” I asked.

“Mmh-hm,” she acquiesced. “I missed it. I remember seeing my father do this. I remember the feeling. I have missed the connection, the link, the weight of it. I have missed where I am from, what I am. I have missed this part of me for a long time. And now, someone told me to indulge to my hearts content.”

“Really?” I asked. “What happened?”

She spent the next fifteen minutes explaining the weight I have been put under, and why I had been struggling so much.

“Will you not struggle too?” I asked.

“I will be fine, child,” she assured me. “I will bear my part and you will bear yours.”

“So, you are now part of Blakemore?”

“I am,” she said. “And so is your father.”

“He too?”

She nodded. “He will not leave here either. It is your family, so shall it be ours then.”

I wrapped my finger over hers.

“You can join without worries now,” she said.

I nodded, knowing she was right.

“Was Kaden okay with all this?” I asked her.

“Surprisingly so,” she said. “He seemed curious to know what it will ultimately mean for his pack. But he said that as long as you were okay with what I wished to do, then I would be put under little to no restrictions, and to refer to you for questions regarding how it will affect the pack.”

“As he?”

“He said that he learnt to trust you. That you have a far better understanding of this than him and that he would be an idiot not to listen to such expertise.”

I smiled. It did sound like him, but it felt nice to hear regardless.

“I will, anyhow, give you the same warning I gave him. This was the second of three. Three battles with, for price, life and sanity, for you, that is. There is still one left to come. I know not where, nor when, nor how, but I know you may never truly rest until the last on is fought.”

“I know it is not over,” I acknowledged.

Her jaw clenched for a moment.

“I don’t know how much me or your father will be of aid to you, but we will be here,” she said.

I nodded.

“I see them sometimes, you know,” I said.

“Who?”

“My children.”

She beamed. “Those are the greatest gift one may ever receive, no matter the difficulties, no matter the pain. They will be your greatest pride and legacy.”

I nodded. “But am I ready?”

“No one truly is, until one is resting in your arms. It is knowledge stronger than gravity itself, it is a love, deeper than anything you may think yourself capable of. When the time comes, it will be the right time.”

I nodded.

“Those battles,” I said. “I did not fight them, not on my own.”

“No battle is ever truly fought alone. You may be aware or not. But there is always another, somewhere, sharing part of that burden for you.”

She caressed my hair gently.

“He loves you, you know,” she said.

“I know.”

“And so do you.”

“I do,” I admitted.

There was a quiet sadness in her eyes.

“He is not like him,” I told her.

“I know.”

“We can all build something here.”

“So it seems.”

— Kaden —

I heard a knock on my door.

“Yes,” I said.

“Hey there,” said Alik as he walked into my office.

I was in the office wing of the packhouse. I had managed to do a lot from home, but there were pressing things that would be better taken care of from the office. Brandon had a long list of things for me to sign.

With everything that has happened in the last few weeks, I’d barely stayed on top of everything, and with both Darren and Eva away, it was not the best. But they were doing some work remotely and I really couldn’t complain about them. My mother really took Jasmine in charge, and apparently she was more motivated than ever to do something out of her life, which was encouraging. Araeya, Elaeya’s mother, was with her, so I wasn’t too worried. Things were starting to fall back into place regardless, which I considered a pretty good achievement in and of itself.

“Sit,” I told Alik.

He walked to my desk and dropped his ass on one of the black leather chairs.

“So, it seems I have to thank you a lot lately,” I told him.

He beamed. “I’m the best,” he said rubbing his nails over his chest.

Little punk.

"How are things going with the warning system over the territory?" I asked him.

"Two of your packs' territories are completely done," he said. "I'm in various stages of preparations for four more. I received maybe half of what I'll need for the wards on the packhouse, so I'm not there yet for this part, but working my way to it."

I nodded. "So far, you've been doing a great job. I should have hired you sooner."

"God, I'm good," he said pridefully.

I shook my head.

"I received a text from home a couple of hours ago saying that Elaeya is awake and doing well."

"I'm glad to hear," he said sincerely, his cockiness vanishing instantly.

"I still have difficulty wrapping my mind around how it all devolved like this."

"It's kinda logical, actually."

"How so?"

"Okay," he said leaning forward and sitting on the tip of his chair. "Everything comes at a cost, right?"

"Right," I agreed.

"For example, werewolves, you have greater strength than human, you have teeth and claws and everything scary. But as you have these additional strength, you also have additional weakness, like wolfsbane. Each breed has their own set of pros and cons. If you have an insanely powerful being—like, let's say, a god. They have way more additional strength compared to a human than a werewolf does, but they might not have the free will that something like you and I have," he said, leaning back down on his backrest and putting his elbows on the armrests. "Different prices for different gifts."

"Sure," I admitted.

"So you have a hybrid," he continued. "They generally inherit a few of those. If they mix well together, you have someone like Ylva, but if the mix clash together, you get a less pleasant result."

"But not Elaeya."

"Nope. She doesn't technically have it all, but she can access it. All the gifts—which can make her potential very powerful—."

"But she pays the prices for them all," I reasoned.

"Bingo!" he said. "And what do you think happened when a pro of one is the con of the other."

I paused. "That sounds actually a lot like a paradox," I noticed, frowning.

His eyebrows went up. “Actually, yes. It’s not a bad analogy,” he said. “Let’s just said that it has its risks.”

“How do you know all this?”

“Some of it is simply magic theory. When you know the laws of the universe, you can generally calculate different outcome with different parameters, but wizards have also compiled information on vitteraï.”

“Have they?”

“Yeah, some of us were the one that found some of the farms.”

Farms. That was not a term I liked, neither I wanted to imagine.

“What was found there was not super pretty,” he continued. “A lot of subjects were put down by my kind.”

I repressed an instinctual growl.

He raised his hands in a pacifying gesture.

“Please, do know than one, I was not there, and two, most were not in any conditions to be saved.”

“How so?”

“The general practice was to collar them with vinethorns—.”

“What’s that?” I interrupted him.

“A sort of large collar that was invented to deal with them. It has some thorny vines than sink into the skin and suppresses most abilities linked to magic. It incapacitates a lot of things out there. It’s particularly efficient on vitteraï, but it can work on nearly anything. You need a scarily powerful being to be able to push, even a little, against it. Nowadays it’s used by some mercenaries, some armies, black market peddlers and a bunch of other joyful nasties.”

I nodded.

“So,” he said getting back to what he was saying. “Those girls were generally locked, bred, occasionally maimed for additional income and kept as such. The children were generally put into captivity from birth to go through the same process. Most adults didn’t even speak languages and were highly feral. Was it caused mostly by their genetic, how they were raised, or most probably both? Ultimately, we’ll never know.

Some wizards studied them as much as they could and documented it, but they were, in the end, too dangerous to keep into captivity.”

“Captivity,” I said, my voice arctic.

“There were not sane, Kaden. Some were maybe sixth to twelfth generations of breeding with all sorts of things. How do you think they would have been restrained from hurting others, or themselves?”

I said nothing.

“Someone like Elaeya, with a few generations of different mixes, that is sane and functional—it’s pretty rare, even back in their heydays.”

I frowned at that.

“Doesn’t it mean that further outer-breeding could lead to—,” I didn’t finish. I was really not keen on the idea.

“She’s a werewolf already. Different breeds of the same thing is not as bad as different species altogether.”

“What if the kids just—,” I let the words hang.

“That, I don’t really know. Maybe it won’t be too much of an issue with proper care and education, maybe not. But you might have to keep that risk in mind if you get grandkids and great-grandkids who are a little more adventurous.

Because, the thing is, most hybrids were treated so bad that it was hard to find specimens that turned right. Most that were sane, bred with no more that one other specie.”

I nodded.

“I guess it’s pretty serious if you’re thinking of kids so much,” he said.

“She sees them,” I said. “In visions.”

“Oh,” he said.

“Plus, we’re getting married, so—.”

“Well, congrats.”

“Yeah, well I could have waited a bit for this.” I rubbed at my shin.

“Not ready?”

“More like too busy. Granted, I don’t have to deal too much with preparations—though, I’m not sure of the wisdom of giving my mother free-reign—but I haven’t even managed to get a freaking ring yet, and it’s in less than a month now.”

“Well, it’s not like you don’t have the money, right?”

“Yeah, well—.”

"Ah," he said, figuring it out. "But if you get any random trinket it will be seen as not so valuable and everyone judges you on everything because in the end it's all political."

I pointed my hand in a 'voilà' gesture at him. He saw pretty clearly what was going on.

"This is my own personal Hell," I said.

He snorted.

"Is there some smarmy wizard wisdom on the subject?" I asked him.

"Man, we're not the same. You have money, I have magic," he said.

I titled my head questioningly.

"Here." He took a ring off his finger. "It's for shields. This." He took a bracelet off. "Protection against ghosts, this." He pointed at his belt. "Captures lifeforce little by little, so that if I get injured, despite the fact that I don't have your super-healing, I can get back on my feet in a jiffy. Never trust that a wizard is weaponless as long as there is something on him. Attacks, veils, protections—we cover our asses. So I'd do something like that for my girl."

One words resonated in my skull. "Protection?" I asked.

Three wars, a third battle for Elaeya and the gods know what it'll be.

"Sure," he said.

"How does it work?" I asked him.

"Everything depends on what you want to do, and how, and what you have at your disposal. Crystals are great at a vast majority of things, but not specialised. A more refined stone could hold a more specific spell. Bloodstones, diamonds, jade, everything as it's set of properties that you could build upon."

"What about moonstones?" I asked. "Or white opals?"

He smiled. "Not bad options."

I shook my hand. "First, we should take care of something more pressing."

"What is it?"

"Do you have another gig planned after this?" I asked him.

"Not yet," he admitted.

"How about you set up shop here? I suggested. "Permanently."

— Chapter Fifty-Eight —

PART OF THE PACK

— Kaden —

I saw the wheels spin behind the wizard's eyes. I let them.

I've had more than enough time to think about it.

"See," I said. "My advisory council doesn't have a Head of—what would it be—magic? It has been a terrible oversight from my part and I do intent to correct this as soon as possible, and you seem like an excellent candidate."

"Just like that?"

"Mishka vouched for you. You save my mate twice. You have done great work and as been great council. What should be more to show me your potential?" I asked. "I can ask Elaeya it if makes you feel better?"

He said nothing for a full minute. I leaned back in my chair, watching the gears spin in his mind.

"You know that I'm not a werewolf, right?" he finally said.

"Obviously," I said. "But if I can accept werejaguars, and freaking werecoyotes, I don't see why I couldn't make an exception for you."

"But those as shifters, I'm not."

"From what I've heard, there's been more than a few wizards who've dabbled into shapeshifting."

"Sure, but that's magic."

"Weren't you the one telling me half an hour ago that shifting is magic?"

"Well, yeah, but that's different."

"Is it?" I asked. "Do you think that after accepting a mate like mine, and her family, that I will have many qualms about you?"

"Right," he said quirking his head aside.

"I like having competent people," I told him. "I like having reliable people, loyal people, trustworthy people."

"I'm not really good at worshiping the ground someone walks on."

“I’m not asking you to,” I said.

“But that’s kinda what your people do.”

“They show respect the way they see fit. If you see differently, I can respect that.”

He slouched in his chair thinking.

“You don’t have to give me an answer now if you’re not ready, but I am. The moment your mind is made, I will process. And resources will be given for you to more here.”

“And where would I live exactly?”

“Where you want. If you accept the position I’m offering, you would be justified to live in the packhouse, you could get a house, an apartment. On Blakemore proper, or in Blakeden. If you prefer on the other territories, I can make an official request to the Alpha in charge.”

“That would depend on the rent.”

“Any ranking position automatically includes living accommodations.”

“Rank?”

“I consider rank beyond just betas and gammas.”

“You think a human can be part of a pack?”

“Aren’t you a wizard? Aren’t you the one with all the answers?”

He thought about it. “In theory, it would work.”

“Then?”

“Oh, what the hell,” he said raising his sleeves.

— Elaeya —

“Well,” said Shae. “I think we should separate them all. The introduction to the pack, the Luna ceremony, and the wedding. Three events.”

“Wouldn’t that be too much?” I asked her.

“When will be the marriage?” asked my mother.

“On the full moon, or course,” replied Shae.

“So the Luna ceremony would be on the waxing moon?”

“Exactly.”

“It sounds sound.”

Shae beamed at her.

“Would it be possible for me to preside over both? I don’t mean to take over all the ceremonies, just to have a few things of our traditions?”

Shae clapped her hands together.

“That sounds brilliant,” she said. “I don’t see why we could not.”

There was a lot of white fabric that was being twisted over my frame by Morea.

She titled her head sideways.

“It doesn’t feel right, does it?” told her Shae. Both her and my mother were sitting in our drawing-room while I was standing on top of the coffee table to be twirled and moved around by Morea.

“No. I don’t think this is a good fabric for her. I would go with something with more pizazz,” said Morea.

“Yes, please,” said Shae. “I want everyone present to be blown away. This is pretty, but not out of this world. She’s out of this world, so I want her to wear a dress that says the same.”

Morea thought carefully.

“You know what I’d like to see?” she asked.

“Pray do tell,” said Shae.

“Something riské.”

“Like what exactly?” I asked suspiciously.

“I don’t have the image in my mind exactly. At least not precisely, but it’s getting there.”

“Let yourself go wild,” said Shae. “And make sure it looks like nothing you see on most weddings.”

“I can do that.”

I looked around a little unsettle. My mother gave me an apologetic smile.

“Now, you and I,” said Shae turning to my mother and taking her hand in between hers. “Have a lot to talk about.” She looked at her watch. “My son should be back soon, so we should go and take care of business, and leave the love birds on their own for a little while.”

My mother nodded.

Everyone kissed and they all left within a few minutes. I was left a little dizzy on the love seat.

Kaden came in not long after.

“So, how have been things here?” he asked as he walked in.

“Your mother is a little intense,” I told him.

“You don’t have to tell me, I know.”

“I think the final decision is to make three events.”

“What? For what?”

“Make me part of the pack,” I said ticking one finger. “Luna ceremony,” I said ticking a second. “And the wedding.” I ticked a third.

He dropped on the seat next to me.

“It’s not that I’m against it, but I’m not sure I have time for this,” he said at a loss. “When would be the first?”

I shrugged. “She said one per week, as the wedding would be on the full moon,” I said calculating, “Then it would make the first, this Friday.”

His eyes got rounder.

I wrapped my arms around his arm. “Let’s eat first, and then we can see how to make your workload lighter,” I told him.

“Are you gonna magically sort everything, because if you do, I’ll marry you.”

I smiled. “Something like that.”

It was in the early hours of the morning, when we finally went to bed, but we’d gone through at least four full day’s worth of work together.

We were so spent that we barely got out of our clothes to drop on the bed and were asleep instantly.

We spent the next couple of days doing mostly the same, I would come to his office and do anything I could to help accelerate the process so to have his workload as reduced as possible.

On Friday, it was the first event on our calendar.

We have managed to make Shae keep this one on the smaller end of the scale. She regardless, made an evening event in the ballroom where every Alphas and ranked member of Blakemore and its packs were invited.

I spent most of the evening being introduced to people I had never met, and a few I had.

I have received more flowers than, well, I don’t think I have ever received flowers before.

There was someone dedicated to take the bouquets from me after each time I received them. They all disappeared, I don’t know where, but I suspected that I might find a lot of them in vases over every surface at home.

Everyone was kind and respectful.

I sipped a little champagne, and ate from the buffet of amuse-bouche, Kaden nearly always by my side.

I felt more at ease when he was there. It was like his confidence was radiating through me.

I could do this, couldn't I?

He made me feel like I could.

— Chapter Fifty-Nine —

EVERYTHING FADED

— Elaeya —

Kaden was walking me to a peer in Blakeden's quaint port.

He did not employ Sam and drove us himself. I was really curious what was all of this about, but I said nothing and waited patiently.

He guided me to a thirty feet yacht, all white and beautiful.

"A boat?" I asked.

"It's harder to be distracted if we're away from civilization," he explained.

"True," I admitted.

On the deck, there was a table set for two.

So this was a date.

Interesting.

"Give me a sec," he said and went ahead.

A little later, the boat left and I looked at the setting sun over the vast lake as the wind blew through my hair.

It was beautiful.

"Are you cold?" he asked me when he returned.

The northern wind was much sharper than it had been the last few weeks, but there would not be any freezing for weeks still.

"I am fine," I told him.

He circled his arms around me regardless. It made me smile.

"What is all this about?" I asked him.

"Someone helped me do two weeks of paperwork in a few days. I thought we should celebrate."

"But this is not all this is about?"

He frowned. "I know I'm not the best at surprises, but you're even more terrible than me."

I tilted my head. "What kind of surprise?"

The way he looked at me made me think he was trying to sort out what I knew and did not.

"Well," he finally said. "Things should have been in a different order, but I thought I should ask properly regardless."

It clicked. "Yes," I said.

You looked at me suspiciously. "You know what I'm about to ask?"

"Yes and it is yes," I said turning around.

He shook his head in disbelief. "So much for romance," he said. "You know, I really tried this time."

I put my hands on either side of his face and pulled it down to kiss him. He indulged me.

It was a long kiss and soon enough, his arms were pressing my body to his.

"I don't need the romance," I said. "Just you."

He smiled.

"Well." He put one of his hands in his pocket and pulled out a little wooden box with a carved flower on it.

I could not stop myself from beaming.

He took my left hand and slipped the metal ring around my finger.

I felt it.

It was magic. Intricate. Probably better than anything I've ever done. And it was strong, subtle, hard to notice, but strong regardless.

I felt my eyes rounding and my breath hitched up.

He looked at me with a satisfied smirk.

"It seems I can surprise you after all," he said.

"How?" I asked.

"I had help," he admitted.

"Alik," I said.

He nodded.

I put my left hand on his chest and looked at the ring.

It was a stunning piece of art. The metal criss-cross in vine-like elegant patterns, with little dots of shimmering stones like minuscule dewdrops and a center stone of pure multicoloured opalescence.

"What kinds of stones those are?" I asked curiously.

“White opal in the center, moonstone for the little ones.”

I concentrated on the enchantment, but I could not understand its makeup.

“What kind of magic is this?” I asked confused.

“One that I heard is not very common. I was told it was a lot more generic that most enchantments, and would probably be better suited for you. The wizard said people don’t usually go for something this broad and vague, but he said that given your gifts, you would probably find a proper application when the time would come. That it’s strong enough and versatile enough for a variety of things, but probably too complex to both make and use for most people to find good use for it.”

I nodded. “What kind of fulcrum was used in there? I don’t think I have ever felt anything like it.”

“I thought you might have known.”

I frowned. “It is familiar, I don’t know how, but it is not magic I have encountered before.”

“It’s animamancy.”

“Life magic?”

“It’s built over a piece of soul. I’m told it’s one of the most potent form of magic there is.”

I snapped my hand on his chest, over his heart, and went to look inside.

“You ripped off a part of your soul?” I nearly shouted. “It is like amputating a limb.” I was baffled.

He shrugged. “I did say I would have given an arm—,” he began.

“But that’s your soul,” I said shaken.

“Relax Ela,” he said grabbing my hand and wrapping his enormous finger over mine. “It will not kill me, souls grow back. It’s like blood, you can lose some and it’ll return later. You told me that people share and give pieces of their souls all the time.”

“Yes,” I admitted. “But this is a big piece, and your soul was injured not long ago, and it took so much time to get better.”

“Alik said it didn’t heal because you were away, and that within a month, this one would be healed too.”

“Oh.” I looked at the ring again, still shaken by what he had given me.

“It’s just that with all that is happening and all that may come, I want to make sure nothing is left to chance.”

I looked up and nodded.

"Just don't take it off," he said.

"I won't," I replied and kissed him.

It was slow at first but it grew in intensity, and I don't know how long we were standing like this, but I vaguely remember being lifted up, my legs wrapping instinctively around him and feeling the brisk night air fade to the ship's warmer interior.

We made quick order of our clothes, and we found ourselves on a bed. Him below me, in between my thighs as I raised our pleasure in cadence with the swaying of the waves under the haul.

Every time I heard the low rumble of his voice, my toes curled.

We made love, slowly, patiently, passionately. His hands never away from my body, mine on his chest.

The world, time, this location, everything faded and there was nothing else but him and I. It could have lasted for hours, days, or centuries, it did not matter but the contact of his skin against mine.

I did not know the time, but I knew it was late when we finally crumbled on the sheets in exhaustion.

His stomach rumbled audibly.

We giggled.

"I'm so hungry right now," he said with a smile, tucking behind my ears a few loose strands of hair.

"I am absolutely starving," I replied. "I think my stomach is self-cannibalising now."

He picked his phone on the bedside table and typed a quick text, then moved up the covers over us.

Staff brought us our dinner, and I felt myself blush furiously. Kaden looked absolutely unaffected by the sudden intrusion.

We ate once they left and we covered ourselves with bathrobes.

The food was warm and perfect, with probably a small army of personnel—or as many who could fit on the ship without being intrusive—who took care of everything.

I guess this is what Mariqueen had meant when she talked of royalty.

I gave a quick glance at the ring on my finger. Never did the impending wedding feel as real as now.

— Chapter Sixty —

A TERRIFIED CHILD

— Kaden —

Ela and I had decided to work through the rest of the weekend to clear as many things off my schedule as possible.

“At this point,” I told her from the chair in my office. “We might have time for a honeymoon,” I said rubbing at my shin.

“We won’t,” she said.

She was sitting on the long chesterfield leather couch at the back of the room.

“No honeymoon?” I asked her.

She looked up at me. “I don’t know,” she said, pensive. “But not at the moment. Maybe later this winter?” she suggested.

I leaned back in my chair. “Does it bother you?” I asked her.

She titled her head. “We cannot always get what we want, Kade. This was rushed to begin with. There are many things underway. I can be patient. I am more than happy. Aren’t you?”

“I am,” I confirmed. “I can wait too, I just don’t want my hectic life to make you miserable.”

“If I could not stand your hectic life, I would not be marrying you.”

I conceded her point in half shrug. “True,” I admitted. “But we could at least try to make it work.”

“We are,” she said. “But something else will take the time we are saving up.”

“Do you know what?”

She shook her head.

Someone knocked on the door.

“I should leave you to work,” she said as she got up to answer the door.

She was still trying to stay out of the way whenever someone came to me for something. She was really trying to adjust, which I appreciated, but I was not pushing her either. It was a lot to adapt too. But I did take her to the office often now, and she was getting more comfortable with helping me, which she did splendidly.

She didn't always understand the work, but she—I guess—understood me enough to work out what I wanted or needed with this.

Sometimes, she would lay a hand on me to get a read on my position on something, or do similarly on papers, guiding the decision-making process.

I knew that using her gift so often made her a bit more tired.

On the other hand, she had started to read some of the documents, and ask questions about it.

I did give her the rundown on a lot of business and pack-related ventures. The mathematics of the business side seemed to be a lot for her. Which was absolutely normal for someone who never studied or worked in business. But she was good with people, and her insights were valuable.

In other circumstances, teaching a newbie on all this would have been too much time for what I could afford—especially right now—but given all the help she gave me, I still gained time more than I lost.

She paused as her hand made contact with the doorknob, her eyes nothing but slits.

I couldn't read her well enough yet to know if there was a problem or she was just getting insight. But she finally opened the door to usher whoever it was in, only she didn't leave and returned to her place on the couch.

A man walked in. He was in his late fifties, well built, with the shape of someone who's worked with his hands all his life.

I didn't recognise him, but then again, I didn't know everyone in my pack on sight, and if he'd been allowed to come to my office by my staff, then it meant he checked out.

I leaned back into my chair and looked a him. I gestured at one on the chair before me.

He shook his head.

"I won't bother you for long, Alpha," he told me.

So I signed for him to say what he needed.

"It's because of my daughter that I'm here. You see, she has been harassed everywhere she goes, but I can't find out who his stalking her. She can't sleep, her grades are going down, she's just a terrified child."

"How young is she?" I asked him.

"Fourteen, Alpha."

"What pack are you from?"

"Bluedawn, Alpha."

“Have you talked to Alpha Van Der Berg?”

“I have, Alpha. He has helped, there is more security near my home and my daughter is not followed as much, but she barely leaves the house anymore anyways. But despite this, she still receives messages, taunts, it never truly stopped. The Alpha is helping however he can, but it’s not enough. I thought that maybe you have better resources. My daughter is not the lively little girl I’ve known all my life and I can’t stand back powerless and watch her life being taken apart like this.”

Elaeya rose from her seat, gave me and him a look, then moved her gaze to the door.

“What is your name?” I asked him as I got up.

“Bakker, Sir. Levi Bakker.”

“And your daughter’s?” I closed my laptop.

“Nikki.”

I nodded. “Lead the way,” I told him.

His eyes widened, but he didn’t hesitate for long.

We walked out, Elaeya next to me.

Levi took his old Ford pickup and Sam drove us to Bluedawn Territory.

As usual, Elaeya had no idea what was going on, other than we should go. I would have normally sent someone, but it seemed, we will take care of this one personally.

The Bakker’s house was a nice one. Nothing frivolous, but exuding the character of the family. It had plenty of pictures and trinkets everywhere, but it didn’t feel like clutter, more like a lot of personality.

I noticed in the distance the movement of a sentry.

I had warned on my way, Tristan Van De Burg that I was coming onto his territory.

I didn’t know exactly what I could do here myself, so I simply asked to see the family and to have them tell me all that they knew.

It didn’t take long though for Elaeya to focus her attention elsewhere entirely, so I raised my hand to stop their chatting and looked at her.

She looked questioningly at me.

I nodded, giving her permission for whatever she needed and she got up from the couch we had been sitting on in the family’s living room, and she started to wander.

I got up to follow her. When I saw them about to interrupt us to ask questions, I shook my head at them and they simply following us in silence.

Elaeya led us to what I assumed was the girl's bedroom.

She pushed a few things away to get a better view of an air vent. She moved her hands over it, stopping at various screw heads.

"Could I have a screwdriver please?" she asked looking up.

Levi looked about to question her, but when I looked at him, he just complied and left to return not long after with the tool.

Elaeya thank him and set to work on the four screws. I bent down on my shin next to her. She gave me the screws and used the screwdriver to pry the grate off the wall, then put it aside.

She inserted her hand in the darkness inside and pulled an electronic device.

"Well, fuck," I said.

"What is it?" she asked me.

"Camera. Small, portable, long-range, live feed," I said.

Levi started to string up lines of curses behind us.

I've no idea how I would feel if I'd just discovered some creep had been spying, in my own home, on my teenage daughter. I'd probably feel pretty murderous at this point.

Elaeya gave me the camera, and got off her knees.

I put the screws on a nearby desk and followed her.

She stopped in the bathroom looking up at the ceiling fan right above the shower.

Levi, anticipating what it meant, started cursing once again, but stopped as his wife began crying.

I was glad the girl was in school and not here.

I put the camera I was holding on the counter and took the screwdriver from Elaeya as she would struggle to reach the fan up there. I unclipped the cap, then unscrewed the whole thing.

She oriented me to find the other camera, a similar model. Something, I guessed, that could probably be found online for fairly cheap.

"Is there other's?" asked Levi.

Elaeya tilted her head and her eyes changed colour for a while, until she shook her head.

I called my tech team and took the cameras downstairs.

They arrived not long after and installed their gear on the kitchen table. It was always easier to analyse from the same Wi-Fi network, and we let them work.

“Is he using a VPN?” I asked them.

“I think so,” said one of my tech.

“What does it mean?” Asked Maud Bakker, her husband still holding her hand.

She was a stocky woman. Not conventionally pretty, but she had pleasant features that looked very motherly.

“It means that he re-routed the signal, which can make it nigh impossible to trace,” said one of the techies.

“Ah!” said the other guy. “The idiot used a tablet a couple of times and didn’t connect it to the VPN.”

“Can you trace its location?” I asked.

“Yep.”

I reassured the Bakkers that we were doing all that was necessary as we left.

Outside, I took my phone out to contact Tristan and update him on this.

Elaeya put a hand on my chest, so I stopped and looked at her.

“Something is wrong about this,” she said.

“Wait up,” I said to the man piling inside their car. “What is it?” I asked her.

“The one who did this,” she said. “Something is wrong. I think something more should be found about him. When you find him. Interrogate him properly, there is more to this story.”

I nodded.

I relayed everything to Tristan and he invited us to his packhouse for dinner.

His wife had taken their children with her to see her family so he was alone when we met him.

We talked about this whole situation, but midway through dinner, his team called him to ask for him to come to deal with a situation. So we wrapped the meal quickly and joined him to his compound where his interrogation cells were.

“Alpha,” said the man who greeted us to Tristan. “Alpha,” he said turning to me. “We investigated the home of the perp and have begun interrogation,” he said with a military cadence.

“His name his Justin Borrowitz, twelve—,”

“What?” Tristan interrupted him. “Twelves-year-old?”

“Yes, Sir,” he said. “We found a lot of disturbing material on his computer. Not all of which regarding the Bakker girl. Because of your tip, we dug in further and questioned him about it.”

“Turns up the kid and one of his cousins are involved into some sort of sexual behaviour with a Bryan Borrowitz and an accomplice.”

“The father?” asked Tristan.

“Uncle,” he said.

“Was the videos of Nikki Bakker for the uncle too?”

“No, Sir,” he said. “We’re not yet sure, but we think there as been long-term sexual abuse in this household. We think the kid acted on his own towards the Bakker girl. I called a child psychologist in town and she said it could be a developing deviancy due to the abuse. You know, the abused becoming abuser, type thing,” he sighed disgusted.

It’s always worse when the victims and children.

“This is not our area of expertise, Sir,” the man added. “We’re not trained in these types of situations. I don’t think we’ve faced those before.”

Tristan nodded. “I’m not very familiar either.”

“I can call Brandon. We have someone for case of domestic abuse. Continue getting information about this. There will be ramifications for his acts, but he should be treated as a minor in all this, and I want the two men arrested. Make sure you get proofs, confessions, track that cousin too. This case as to be solid. Can you handle the parents?” I asked Tristan.

“Yes.” He sighed. “It’s going to be a damn long night.”

— Chapter Sixty-One —

NOT ON MY WATCH

— Kaden —

Since the incident with the hidden cameras, the news of Elaeya's abilities has spread like wildfire and impressed a whole lot of people.

There has been a number of requests for her, and I'm starting to think that soon, she will need her own office and secretary to deal with everything.

I couldn't afford to always go with her, so Ylva, who has been reinstated as her main bodyguard has been going with her most of the time.

I had to admit that it felt nice to see how rapidly everyone wanted to accept her. Evidently, the news of the Luna ceremony this weekend and our wedding the following weekend had gotten a lot of attention.

I had been on an uncharacteristically good mood until I'd gotten news of a visit from the Moonhunter Brotherhood's envoys the evening before.

Since, it has been chaos in the office. Most had been running around in circles trying to prepare for everything.

Getting a visit from the Brotherhood has never truly been a matter for worries before, but this one was different. The situation was tense between us. Jean-Philippe had called me late yesterday to tell me that he had gotten his hand on information about this meeting. And though the situation with the artifact would have led to this, eventually, it was the rumours, not only from my interference at Stonewillow, but the fact that a number of packs had come to Blakemore for the type of assistance the Brotherhood should have given, and also that some have been preparing to join us now, that had gotten the Brotherhood's panties in a bunch.

I had no idea what their plan was, but I was pretty sure I wouldn't like it.

They came around noon.

They had ten SUVs packed with people. I guess this was not a small curtesy meeting.

I wasn't by the door of the packhouse to greet them, which I was pretty sure annoyed the crap out of them. Jayson did the greetings and guided them to one of the bigger conference rooms. If we'd known how many of them would be here, we would have set the ballroom for this.

I walked into the room a couple of minutes after everyone had settled.

"So, gentlemen," I said, not hiding the venom from my voice. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

One of the Brother rose on his feet with scorn evident on his face.

“Alpha Devon, we are here for an inspection,” he said.

I stopped myself from showing any sign of emotions as I took my seat at the head of the table.

Most of my people had to stand up as the chairs were nearly all filled with Brothers and their entourage. But this had the side effect of having them surrounded by the towering shapes of my people behind each and every one of them.

I made steeples of my hands on top of the table.

“Inspection?” I asked dangerously. “Blakemore has not had inspections in decades, none under my reign. We have been one of the most active signatories of the Moonhunters Accord, and have been one of the greatest protector of both the Brotherhood and its signatories. So what in all the Hells would warrant such decision exactly?”

I saw a few uncomfortable people sitting before me, but a fewer of them seemed unperturbed.

“Firstly,” said one who grabbed a pile of paper to read. I knew him. I hadn’t dealt with him often before, but I wasn’t particularly fond of him. His name was Sinclair. “You are holding artifacts of great historical and magical power without authorisation.”

I kept my eyes on him as I leaned back in my chair.

“Secondly, you have often engaged in conflicts without the approval of the Brotherhood.”

“I always informed the Brotherhood before actions warranted under the Accord were taken,” I told him.

“But you too often, didn’t do so with time for the Brotherhood to approve of it or not.”

“That is not part of the Accord,” I corrected him. “It is nothing but a curtesy. There is no legal obligation to oblige. I breached no laws.”

“Your actions,” he continued as if I had given no objections. “Have led, lately to a war with a fellow signatory pack.”

“One, I did not start anything that I did not finish myself. Two, men under their employ took, hurt, and tried to kill my own sister. That alone give me all the right to ask for a bloodgild. But they also caused grief to a number of allies who asked for help, and attacked another, killing the Alpha, Luna, and their heirs. And their new Alpha approved and supported my interference on their behalf, and did so officially. This is all according to the Accord’s own laws. I’ve not only respected them all, but also followed the procedures as requested. If you don’t like how I did this, then this is a matter of opinion, not laws. Do not believe that your position can give you rights of biases over signatories. Your role is to be neutral, don’t forget it, because I won’t.”

Sinclair paused for a moment, gaining back is baring before he continued.

“Following said war, once the situation has calmed down, you did not send the artifact to the care of the Brotherhood.”

“I’m under no such obligation. Again, this would only be a curtesy, it’s no law,” I told him.

“It is the role of the Brotherhood to maintain order between pack. You, keeping them, could be seen as a sign of an upcoming imbalance.”

“Or simply a sign that I believe they are more secure here,” I said.

“They can be secured at the capital,” he told me.

“Are many warriors do you have exactly?” they all knew I had far more than them.

“Nothing is stopping you to send a delegation of warriors to the capital to help secure the artifact,” said an older Brother next to Sinclair. I think his name was Joffrey.

“It’s not just the warriors, the territory is safer here,” I told him.

“I heard there as been an attack at the core of your territory not long ago,” said Joffrey.

How the Hell did he learn of this? I’m going to have to dig into how the Brotherhood is getting information about my pack.

“Firstly, it was not a regular opponent, but an Other.”

That got the attention of everyone. Any who knew even the slightest thing about Others knew they were no fair opponent to a werewolf.

“Secondly,” I continued. “It has been properly banished.” I let that information sink in. There were a few impressed faces around the table. “And thirdly, the place is being warded against Others and a variety of other spectral and spiritual entities, with additional layers of protections. I can assure you gentlemen that the probability of this occurring a second time is nigh impossible.”

A few of them looked at one another concerned.

“Now, before you start arguing again about the damn artifacts, I have sent you reports about then, and partnership in tracking the original owners of them all for proper restitution. This is all but a temporary situation, and moving them from location as little as possible, especially when they are properly guarded, is the best approach, security-wise.”

I saw Sinclair open his mouth, so I cut him off first.

“Also, the trust in the Brotherhood has been eroded with the years, and not just with me, but many others. After the Belfast incident, and the destruction of Schönmond, and all the leaks, and Cyryl Dabrowski’s rampage, you can’t be expecting otherwise. Trust is earned.”

I had just listed some of the worst event in the Brotherhood’s recent history, and they knew how bad those made them appear.

I was not trying to antagonize them, and actually, more than a few of them were pretty decent people. They tried their best at making a difference. But like any organisation that last for more than a few decades, bureaucracy sets in first. Then there is complacency, some bribing, laws getting more and more convoluted with time, loopholes adding to other loopholes, and people losing the original goal of the organisation, to a more self-serving one.

The Brotherhood was full of idealists, but also of opportunists. Sometimes, it's even hard to separate them, and to know which is which as they grow more entrenched in their ways. It's not just the Brotherhood too, plenty of Packs are facing similar issues, especially the old packs, or the big ones. Blakemore is both, and actually, my great-grandfather had to overhaul the whole power structure, even back then, and purge out a lot of rotten apples out of then Blakewoods as things had become dangerously precarious. It's not uncommon for packs to have to go through a similar situation every few decades or at least centuries, otherwise the packs often fall apart or get taken over by another. And every time our packs have grown, we have to be careful on what foundation we set this up on. I won't let it fall, not on my watch.

"We have heard that you're getting involved in another conflict?" said Joffrey. "We also heard you might be adding more packs to Blakemore?" he looked me up his nose. "How many Alphas do you have?"

"Thirty-six. A number you already have," I told him, my voice lowering.

"How many blood-Alpha do you have?" he said, his voice colder.

"I frankly haven't kept count."

"A hundred?"

"If you count the active Alphas and their blood relatives, it shouldn't be too far from that," I admitted.

"But you have more. There have been smaller packs that have been fully absorbed. How many Alpha bloodlines are running inside Blakemore?"

"I don't compile this data."

"You see, this, to us, is a red flag. A large pack that goes awry is bad, but a pack with so many Alphas is a lot worse. You don't have warriors, Alpha Devon, you have an army. How many packs do you think should have to unite against you if you decided to go on a conquering spree? We have enjoyed a good relationship, regardless of this, up to now. But your recent behaviours are particularly worrisome. Blakemore as grown more than 900% in the last decade and a half. Now you want more growth, and refuse to give objects of power to a neutral party. You have to see how concerning this is from our perspective."

I leaned back into my chair and tried to stay diplomatic.

"You have been informed that no pack has been absorbed into Blakemore since its creation, through force. It has existed for more than fifteen years now. Most of the growth you speak of have come since the creation of Blakemore. Those who chose to join since then, did so willingly. Must I stress that the main reason this has occurred as been for protection? Protection which in the past as been the aegis of the Brotherhood. I have personally petitioned for enlarging the military capacity of the Brotherhood, and its reach under various branches, but some feel this unhealthy competition with packs, including mine, and refuses to head my words. And now, the Brotherhood is dealing with too many issues with its hands tied behind its back.

How do you think this makes the smaller packs feel? How do you think the packs that have limited resources, funds, reach, warriors, how do you think they can prepare for what's to come? If they want their people safe, there are a limited number of choices for them. From changing for better strategical territory, to fuse with another pack. Some packs have gone to great lengths for gaining strength. We are seeing a surge in hostile packs, it has been so for years.

This is not the cause but a mere symptom. Don't go blaming me for how the times are changing. Like everyone, I'm trying to adapt, but are you?"

"I suppose there will be no good in us perpetually throwing the blame at one another," Joffrey said.

"Obviously not," I said.

"We will wrap this up before dinner, and may proceed with the inspection tomorrow."

I grinded my teeth.

"Also, I believe congratulations must be in order," said another brother who was bald and somewhat rotund. "We caught wind of your upcoming wedding. I'm sure the woman who caught your eye must be exceptional."

What have they heard exactly, I thought. If this is some hidden message, I'm going to ask for blood.

"Is she your mate?" he asked. He looked like he was trying for casual conversation to lighten the mood. It didn't work. I got up off my chair in silence, and stalked out of the room, my people in tow.

— Chapter Sixty-Two —

THERE WILL BE BLOOD

— Kaden —

I didn't offer the curtesy of having dinner with the Brothers, and I went home instead. This was one of the perks of not living inside the packhouse. It was a lot harder for them to sneak up on me and encroach on my life.

"What's going on?" asked Elaeya who came home right after me.

I was still fuming from the damn meeting, but I tried to smooth my expression as I turned around to look at her.

"Maybe you should stay home for a few days," I told her.

"Why?" she asked.

"The Brotherhood is here and I don't want to take unnecessary risks with them around."

"I can do that. Is this why you are so upset?"

"They are fucking inspecting my pack," I seethed. "They're treating me like a vulgar rogue. They dare come here and tell me what I can and cannot do. I swear if they do anything, anything to hurt any of my people, heads will roll."

"Do you think they came here for some kind of attack?" she asked me as we walked to the living room.

I didn't feel like eating.

"Not outright, that's for sure. They're afraid of us. Or at least, some are. They're too few of them here to try anything like this, and they would never do that inside my stronghold, if they'd attack, they'd do it where I'd be weak and at a disadvantage. But that doesn't mean they're not planning some slimy scheme either."

Mrs. Raynolds came in with a beer for me, tea for Elaeya and a tray of entrées. I inclined my head lightly to her in gage of thank you, and took a swig.

"What happened exactly?" Elaeya asked.

I don't know if she could discover anything more in this than I, so I didn't hold back and told her everything. Which has prompted more questions about the packs that asked to join and what is going on in Stonewillow to finally landed on the whole story about the artifacts and what happened to Eva last summer.

Mrs. Raynolds had supplied us with more bite-sized food throughout the evening and we ate casually on the couch. She lit the fireplace at some point too.

I haven't talked this much in a long while. There haven't been many people that I've trusted enough to open up so much, and tonight, the thought of building a life with her, felt more tangible than it had ever done until now.

* * * * *

I woke at four thirty in the morning with a loud 'bang' that resonated through the house, from the outside.

I sat upright instantly and rubbed at my crusty eyes and turned the lamp on.

It was obviously still dark outside. I grabbed a pair of pants and a tee, took my phone and rushed out. I head Elaeya do something similar behind me.

I could hear some distant ruckus outside.

I ran to the lawn beside one of packhouse wings. I speed dialed security to have all the lights on, and it took a few seconds, as I approached, for the night to become as bright as day.

There were three big wolves fanned out in front of one human, and other people came rushing to the location, security with weapons, and a few others ready to shift.

"WHAT THE FUCKING HELL?" I screamed with all the authority I could muster.

The wolves turned to look at me briefly, but the man kept his eyes carefully on them.

"Could you tell those idiots to back off, or I'm going to fry them?" he told me.

"Get away from the wily wizard," I told them. "He's my wily wizard. You hurt him and you've attacked Blakemore."

I knew no one in my pack was stupid enough to do something like this. I wasn't sure of the smell of those wolves, but I was pretty sure they were with the Brotherhood. A few of the Brothers had rushed out, probably attracted by the commotion.

I suspected that this morning's alarm clock had been supplied by the wizard himself.

One of the wolves shifted back to its human form to look confused at me. He was one of the Brother's entourage. The rotund brother was rushing out, sweating on his way. A few more were already here.

"What is going on here?" asked Sinclair.

"That's exactly what I want to know?" I asked.

One of the attackers opened his mouth to answer but I turned my attention to Alik instead.

"Wizard?" I asked.

Sinclair looked absolutely insulted that I would refer to Alik first. But I also always go for the reliable source first.

"I came in late from the job," said Alik. "One of them saw me in the corridor as he was strangely wandering around the packhouse, and I've never seen him there before. Plus, he looked pretty suspicious. I called him up and he realized I was human. So he started to act all high and mighty, until her realized I have magic, then he freaked and a few of his friends joined him in his freak out and I had to defend myself. Violently."

I turned to the man and two wolves.

"Shift," I ordered them.

In a few seconds, I had three naked men before me.

"What were you doing in the wee hours, wandering in my packhouse?" I asked them. My voice was low and dangerous, but I knew they understood every word.

"You're taking the words or a deceitful wizard before your own kin?" asked Sinclair.

"I ask a member of my pack before a stranger, as is customary."

His eyes rounded. I turned to the naked men again. "Talk," I ordered them.

They tried to babble some sort of excuses, but it came out as mostly gibberish.

The whole Brotherhood congregation was there now, but so were a lot of my men too.

"Your pack?" Sinclair said. "Are you saying you have a wizard now."

"Is there a spell for stupidity?" I asked Alik.

"Sadly no," he said. "This is the biggest and most devastating plague the world will ever face and it will end only when we are all dead."

"Dang," said Mishka. "I kinda wished you had one of those spells, I could have raised my IQ by a few points to begin with—for shits and giggles—then de-stupid-fied the rest of the world one smarmy idiot at a time. I would have gotten a Nobel Peace Prize for this shit."

That got more than a few snickers around my people, most of the Brotherhood though, didn't laugh.

Elaeya joined me, her body next to mine.

"This one," she muttered looking at the naked guy in the middle. I didn't know what was wrong with him—and she probably didn't either—but now, I was not leaving here without some serious answers from him.

"I'm sure we can sort this whole mess passively," said Rotund Brother.

Joffrey's eyes were nothing but slits as he looked at the situation, then I saw something I'd dreaded for a long time. I saw his gaze triangulate on Elaeya and his eyes widen in comprehension.

"Get this one in interrogation," I told some of my warriors, pointing at middle-naked-guy.

"Wait," said Joffrey. "You have no authority in the matter."

"Maybe you haven't noticed but this is my pack and your men attack a pack member, inside the bloody packhouse, while doing suspicious things. I have all the rights."

"It's just a misunderstanding," he said.

"I'm sure it is," said Rotund.

"No," said Elaeya.

"Cells," I told my men and they carried all three of them off, with particular attention to middle-guy.

"A spirit wolf," said Joffrey looking intently at Elaeya. "Aren't your kind instinct?"

"What's that?" asked Rotund curiously.

Joffrey's eyes went down Elaeya's body in a way that made me want to really punch him. And his gazed locked on the tip of her hair. He took a shark intake of air in a hiss.

"Hybrid?" he asked.

"Common friend," said Rotund. "The times for hate towards half-breeds have passed a long time ago."

"Those things are different," Joffrey said.

"Things," I said, my voice barely audible, but it got everyone's attention.

"Is this what you've been truly preparing?" he asked unperturbed. "You sought an ace to change your status."

"No, but if you insult my mate and future wife one more time, there will be blood."

"Ah, well, young lady, we finally meet. I'm Stevens, I'm happy to great Blakemore's future Luna—or are you already?" said Rotund.

He extended his hand to Elaeya ad she complied politely, but Joffrey slapped Stevens' hand out of the way.

"Out!" I said to him. "Get their things in their car, I want them out within the hour," I told my men. Many rushed inside the home to comply instantly.

"You can't do that," said Sinclair.

“He can,” corrected Stevens before I could spit venom in Sinclair’s face. “We have just given him one of the biggest insults. We are at the heart of Blakemore, he could ask bloodgild for this, or at least a weregild for the insult.”

“What about them?” asked Joffrey, with a rictus at the corner of his eyes. I knew he was referring to the men I’d taken.

“They will be returned once I have what I need.”

“I know it’s a lot to ask, but I believe that returning them alive, would be a sign of good faith,” said Stevens.

I listened but didn’t take my eyes from Joffrey’s.

“I understand we are in no positions to ask for such, but I believe we could exchange this for dropping the investigation into Blakemore.”

“They will return alive and unarmed,” Elaeya told him.

“Much appreciated,” he said. “And I’m story it has come to this. I would have preferred meeting under better circumstances.”

I saw her incline her head respectfully, he mirrored her, and then ushered the rest of their people to the cars. They were all wearing nightwear or in various states of undress.

I didn’t question Elaeya and stayed looking at Joffrey’s eyes until he was the last one there, then he broke contact first and left.

I wanted to sink my teeth into their flesh.

They did the biggest fuckup in their fucking career.

Even if I do nothing, this will tarnish their reputation for good.

I sighed, and it also means that I no longer control information on who and what Elaeya is.

It means everything could change. And now I have a bloody trio to interrogate.

Elaeya put her hand on my arm. “I will do it.”

I blinked at her.

— Chapter Sixty-Three —

ALL THAT REALLY MATTERS

— Mishka —

I don't know what a spirit wolf is, but it seemed to unnerve some of the Brotherhood.

Since the incident this morning, the whole spirit wolf thing has spilled all over Blakemore. Some were curious, others worried, some excited. But ultimately, no one knew shit about them to really be able to give a proper opinion.

The Brotherhood's behaviours had caused a far bigger scene though. Attacking a pack member then insulting the Luna at the heart of a pack. That's some serious fuckup that is just not done.

I decided to ask to be assigned to the interrogation team mostly out of morbid curiosity. I got really surprised though when the Alpha came in. I wasn't sure it would be important enough for him to get personally involved, but when I realized he brought in his mate. I got more than a little confused.

I know Alik knows stuff about her, but he didn't tell me shit. No matter how much I pestered him.

On the upside, now I might be able to get some first-hand encounter, so I guess I won't stalk him out too much to get him to spill the bean. Just a little bit of healthy stalking, nothing unreasonable. For me, that is.

No one seemed to know what to do with future Luna there, but she walked to the cells without a guide, went straight for the one the Alpha singled out and started the conversation in the oddest way.

"Could you look at me please?" she asked him.

"Why?" he asked, but he looked at her all the same. It's actually a bit hard not to stare at her. I don't know if it's a spirit wolf thing, but she's damn pleasant on the eyes.

"Could you listen to me please?" she asked him.

It was kind of odd to ask, as no one was talking to begin with, and she already had the man's attention.

Then, she just stared at him for nearly a full minute, and the guy just stared back, his face getting more and more slack. Which is when I realized something was not normal. His eyes were a bit glassy, and he wasn't moving other than a few rare blinks.

"What were you doing last night?" she asked finally, her voice calm and even.

“Looking for signs of fortified section of the packhouse.” He said, his voice bland.

Was he hypnotized?

“Did you find any?” she asked.

“No,” he said.

“Why were you looking for this?”

“Brother Bianchi asked me to.”

“Who is Brother Bianchi?”

“One of the senior Brothers at the capital.”

“Was he here?”

“No.”

Do you know why Brother Bianchi wanted you to find this?”

“He never said.”

“Do you suspect something yourself?”

“I think he wanted the artifacts.”

She blinked rapidly a few times, which is how I realized her eyes had changed colour to something paler and reflective, but they were now returning to their original colour.

They both left not long after and we were instructed to see if we could find anything more that could be interesting for the next twenty-four hours, then send them back to the capital.

— Eveline —

I couldn’t believe everything we’d missed in so little time gone.

We rushed everything to be back in time for the Luna Ceremony. I just couldn’t wait.

As next weekend was my brother’s wedding, Michael told us he would have liked to pay his respect and when this reached my mother’s ears, she made sure to get invitations to all of Darren’s family.

His father was not coming. Of all the time I’d spent there, I barely saw him at all. He mostly stayed in a room, alone and refused to see anyone but his wife. She decided to stay with him too.

I was getting worried about the man, and I was not the only one. I think Darren kind of hopped to be able to set things right with him once and for all, but it just didn’t work out this way.

In the end, Michael, Kevin, Kate, Fred and Ana were coming with us for the week.

Ana, as been an absolute mess. She had always been a mass of bubbling energy, but when I came, she hadn't been able to leave her bed. I know that losing a mate is one of the hardest things—and I don't know if I'd ever be able to cope with something like this, but it was so far out of character for her, that it scared everyone even more.

Actually, Michael had asked Darren and I if we could take her with us for a while, so that she wouldn't be reminded of Timothy so much everywhere she laid eyes on. She had been mostly unresponsive to this offer, but we hoped being in Blakemore would help her a bit, and maybe she'd choose to stay for a while longer, get a change of scenery, some fresh air.

The thought alone of what she was going through has had Darren and I closer than ever. It's things like these that makes you realize all that you have and all that you could lose.

At least we were going home, where we were safe, and we would celebrate good things, beautiful things, life, joy, love, all that really matters.

— Elaeya —

I was a nervous wreck.

I was so terrified of messing up and doing the wrong thing. There wasn't that much wrong I could do, but the possibility still haunted me.

It wasn't complicated, I did not have much to do other than being present, but nearly the entirety of Blakemore would be there. Actually, it had been a struggle to find a place big enough for this. My and Kaden's mother went around the land looking for some place outdoor that could accommodate so many.

They settled for one of the oldest parts of Blakewoods. There was a large dolmen and a few megaliths that probably dated to the neolithic era and the land surrounding it contained traces of bronze age settlements. The forest had claimed back of lots of these early signs of civilisation, but it triggered my mother's instincts on so many levels.

The energy of such spaces is different than the rest, and she could perceive this much better than any of them could.

I did not have the time to go and see it before the ceremony, but it lit a fire in my mother's eyes, that I don't remember ever seeing. She asked permission to make a call for ancestors and wear traditional grabs. Everything she asked, either Shae or Kaden authorise. I suspect she never expected to be able to indulge so much, and reconnecting with her roots. It gave a life to her aura that I was grateful for. I did thank Kaden and his mother for this. Shae's response was that she found it absolutely fascinating, and Kaden's was that he never asked for cultural assimilation of any who joined Blakemore and he would certainly not start with me and my family.

Not only did they indulge her, but they enabled her. When she chose the location, rather than say it was too isolated or forested, they sent a team to clear it up. More so, whenever she would ask to spare a tree, they would, whenever she asked to dig something up, or whatever else she asked, they did, no questions. Which has made my mother go a little wild.

I actually haven't seen her nearly all week.

I did not bother me, but I was always a little worried someone at some point would say it was too much, or that she was hijacking the whole ceremony, but no one did, and most would just stare in curiosity.

Just like Alik had been given mostly free reign around Blakemore, so did she, any resources, tools, anything she could need was given to her.

There was also a small farmhouse that had been turned into storage that was now being transformed into a home for my parents.

The Devon's had offered to build something bigger, but I knew they preferred this, and its location was in a densely vegetated area which they preferred.

There was a small cottage, which had probably belonged to indentured serfs in the past, with a little stone barn. They decided to renovate both, the cottage for my mother, and the barn for my father—as the door were wide enough for his wheelchair.

My parents had never been in love. They cared about one another, protected each other. This association had been in great part for their survival, and although I knew they were willing to go to great lengths for one another, I also knew that their heart was too scared to ever indulge in unrestrained love. It actually fitted them well this arrangement. They would live close together, but would regain an independence they had not been able to indulge in for a long time. And although they were at the edge of Blakemore and Blakewoods territory, they were close enough to travel to my home on foot.

There was a small creek near their home, and the footpaths were being restored for better travel for my father. He had equipped his chair for rough terrain, but it would be nice for him to not to have to worry about this too much.

Their home should be ready before the winter, and it would, somehow, be equipped with every modernity these buildings had never seen.

I had been told tonight was a great night for the ceremony. The confluences perfect. I did not master the knowledge of the stars yet, so I did not know how significant it could be, but I felt electricity in the air, a tension both sweet and inviting.

When Kaden and I walked to the site, I instantly knew why this was the place. There was a depth, an energy, a life, far beyond the seen. It had been a place of worship, or work, of

festivity, or community, and of life. For millennia, this force had slowly trickled into the ground.

There was more than just residuals of the past though. I was fairly sure it had its own guardian spirit, which was probably one of the reasons why my mother had barely left this place since she had discovered it. She probably had reached to it, preparing the way.

I was sure that tonight, it was not just to a pack that I was pledging myself.

She would change that.

— Chapter Sixty-Four —

NOT PART OF THE RITUAL

— Kaden —

“Are you okay,” I asked Elaeya.

She had been awfully quiet since we reached the site. Araeya had my people prepare seven large bonfires, three of which would be behind us as we faced the pack. It gave an eerie arcane air to the place, the shadows dancing on the stones erected before us.

Generally, something like this would occur closer to the packhouse, which had bothered my mother given that there had been a few autumn showers this week and the lawn would easily be damaged, so when Araeya asked for this place, where the earth was packed and dry, and would not damage the flower beds, she was on board.

Things did take a turn though, when she came one day with a staff adorned with bones and buckskin leather straps and arcane carving on it, talking to trees and rocks and guiding the whole excavation process.

A lot of trees had been cleared, but not all of them.

The rumours of Araeya’s behaviours had been the talk of the town, which had only triggered more speculations about Elaeya.

People arrived slowly. Those from the farthest territories parked a little further and walked the rest of the way with those who lived closer. More than a few ran here, shifting back to their human forms in the woods, and getting dressed hastily with clothes from packs they’d carried with their teeth.

Traditionally, when older generations were still alive, they would guide the ceremony, until I would give Elaeya’s power to her. But I wasn’t sure what changes would occur with Araeya in charge. I’d been told everyone knew what they needed and there were no changes in my parts, so even though I didn’t have the time to go over this, it should be fine. Everyone had been game with whatever Araeya’s suggestions were, which made me feel better as changes are not always taken well by people in general.

As a race, just like humans, we get easily entrenched in our own habits, and shy away from changes.

Elaeya nodded at me reassuringly and we walked slowly to the podium.

I heard the regular beat of a drum as we drew in closer. It was not a plastic percussion either, but actual skin that resonated through the night. And then she started to sing.

It was not a language that I knew. It was high, long, pristine notes intersected with guttural throat signing. It sounded primal and ethereal at the same time. The drum kept its beat in a mantra-like drone.

Araeya walked up to the podium as we arrived, the sound louder as she joined us.

She was wearing a white buckskin dress with long slits on either side exposing her legs to her hips. Her feet were bare, and little anklet of dangling bones and pearls clanged together to the rhythm of her song. Her hair was knotted and braided in long intricate patterns. Long leather tongues covers most of her face, but I could see patters of browns, blacks, and reds, going from her cheeks to her neck, arms and legs that evoked long lost languages and traditions. Among the braided part of her hair, on top of her skull, was long, wide antlers protruding up.

She had a two feet wide piece of skin held by a rounds wooden circle with a cross in the middle where she held it as she hit the leather drum with a carved bone stick with soft hand-made material on the end.

She stood there in the middle and continued her song as people gathered.

My grandfather looked at her in fascination on the side.

“I’ve heard stories in my youth, you know,” he said to my father. “Traditions that were being lost. Things that used to be part of who we were and were drowned in the Industrial Revolution. We gained a lot with society’s advancement, but there are things we have lost. My great-grandfather told me of how they used to talk to our ancestors and they would respond, until they stopped. There is more to us than just the ability to shape-shift, but most have forgotten. The young often don’t even know.”

My father nodded, looking at Araeya just like everyone else in fascination.

“I tried, you know. To reconnect, get back to the source. But it’s hard when it doesn’t respond anymore,” he continued.

There were strange shapes in the shadows on the stones, shapes that had nothing to do with the flames that cast their lights and everything to do with unseen beings, dancing slowly to the rhythm.

That song, I realised, was a beacon.

“It seems like they might be listening now,” my grandfather said looking at the shapes. “Maybe the future growth of Blakemore as nothing to do with numbers of pack members anymore.”

“Maybe,” my father conceded as a large shape rose, it could be seen vaguely over some of the evergreen canopy behind. It was tall, muscular, with goat-like legs, and large antlers.

It took nearly an hour after that, for people to settle.

My grandmother guided the first part of the ceremony, adding a speech of acceptance, changes, and strength in the face of challenges that was completely her own. She did so gracefully, as always, while Araeya kept her mournful song going in the background.

My mother then took her place, shining in front of a crowd like she always did. She added her own speech on prosperity, growth, and distinction in the face of conformity.

The song ended and Araeya took the ceremonial bowl, to which she added a few plants and things I did not know of, grounding them, then she passed around for us all to put in a few drops of blood that my grandmother fetched with the ceremonial dagger.

My sisters, all participated, even Darren. In the past, it was always just the previous Luna and the Alpha, so this was new. Araeya and Kieran, Elaeya's father, also provided blood.

She started to sing again as she mixed it, then went to Elaeya, gave her the bowl to hold, and used it to draw a long line on her forehead, then to her chin, and she added a few others on her forehead and cheeks, and two long lines at the top of her shoulders going down her arms.

Then Elaeya went to all of us in order of seniority to draw a line that started between the eyebrows and went up mid forehead.

She came to me last and once she did the first line added three on my chin.

Then she went to the center to make her standard pledge.

The fires went wild as if hit by massive amount of wind that we could not feel, and I began hearing a strange buzzing sound, straight in my mind.

Once Elaeya finished her pledge, she bowed her head to the pack in respect, which was not part of the ritual, and the buzzing cleared, and it was like something unplugged.

"Well, I'll be fucking damned," said Alik just beside the dais.

"I looked at him confused."

He smiled at me, his mouth unmoving, by I heard the words clearly in my mind.

'Thought transference,' he said. *'What you guys used to call mindlink'*

"Mindlink?" I said aloud, aghast.

"Dear stars above," said my father, his eyes wide. "We can mindlink?"

"Yep!," said the wizard. "It's a lost skill, but I guess what you needed was an actual Luna to do that. You know, the real deal." He inclined his head deeply in respect to Elaeya, who looked impassive, but I knew she was as surprised as me. And then he inclined to her mother in acknowledgement to what she had done.

"That was how the ceremonies were done in the past, wasn't it?" I asked him.

The crowd was shrouded in silence, listening intently to our conversation.

“I don’t know, but it was close enough to give us long lost perks, even to the non-wolf members. That must mean everything was done right.”

I nodded at him, and inclined my head at Araeya, in equal respect and amazement. Then I smiled at my new Luna.

She was still reeling from what was happening.

“Is mindlink the only perk we’re getting?” asked my grandfather to Alik.

That got everyone’s attention.

“Only time will tell,” he answered. “But expect side-effects.”

“Good or bad?” asked my father.

“Depends on your definition,” said Alik truthfully. “But there’s a reason why spirit wolves were so valued.”

All eyes turned to Elaeya, and I felt her wanting to melt into the floor.

So I decided to help out a bit, I walked to her, took her in my arms and raised her up to kiss her.

That got us a few catcalls.

“Keep some for the weeding,” said some random dude on the crowd, to a few laughs.

I gave him the finger which got more laughers, and I kept kissing her until I felt the tension leave her. Which was long enough to garner more catcalls.

I guess change is not such a bad thing after all.

— Chapter Sixty-Five —

SHE CAN DO MIRACLES

— Elaeya —

I thought I had come to terms with the wealth of the Devon Family. I thought I knew now what to expect and was properly prepared. I was getting used to the power structure and was not as weirded out when people would incline their head to me or go out of their way to help with something. I thought that I had adjusted. That nothing would shock me anymore. I thought my ring was the last thing that had seemed such an excessive gift.

Oh, how I was wrong.

Morea was doing a few touch ups on my wedding dress.

Shae's reaction was similar to her daughters, all oohs and aahs on the sofa, and gushing about every detail of the dress.

Morea's looked proudly at me. Whereas my mother's eyes were probably as big as mine. She had been exposed even less than I to their wealth, and it felt like she suddenly realised the true extent of it.

"I was inspired by that ring of hers," Morea explained to the excited women. "I had to cash a lot of favors to have this done in time. It borders on miracle."

"That is gonna blow everyone away," said Eva, putting her hands on her mouth.

"What is this?" asked Shae sharply to her eldest daughter, snapping her hand in hers.

Eva took her hand away. "Nothing mom."

"That's a ring, Eva."

She looked at me uncomfortable, as her sister went crazy trying to catch a glimpse.

"I don't want to steal your thunder," she told me.

"You aren't," I told her. "Congratulations."

She smiled sheepishly.

"Did Darren ask you in marriage?" asked Lisa.

"Yeah," she admitted. "What happened with his brothers really got to him and said that maybe we should stop waiting for things to run smoothly and instead learn to appreciate what we have to the fullest."

"Please, tell me I get to dress you?" said Morea.

"Sure," said Eva, and as questions started flooding she interrupted them all. "The wedding of the moment is Kaden's and Elaeya's. Darren and I want a summer wedding anyways. We thought maybe to do it around our one year anniversary."

"That's a great idea sweetie," said her mother as she hugged her, quickly followed by hugs from everyone else.

"I am not being cold, I would hug you too, but I am not sure I can get down that table," I admitted. The dress was extremely tight all the way to below my hips and would flow in lighter fabric in a wide arc around me, but the tightness on my upper thigh did limit my capacity for acrobatics and I was terrified of damage anything.

Eva climbed on the table next to me and hugged me.

"I'm so happy Kaden found you. More than you can know," she told me.

"I know," I reassured her.

She beamed at me.

"He's gonna lose his shit when he'll see you."

I turned my head to the mirror, with Eva by my side.

"Is it not excessive?" I asked her.

"Nonsense," said Shae. "I won't let our Luna get married with anything less."

The upper part of the dress was mostly sheer fabric, nearly transparent and covered in gems in long beautiful patterns. My shoulders and hands were actually the only things exposed, but the design of the dress made me feel awfully naked. It was implied more than shown, but it did look like the upper part of my body was dress in mostly gemstones and nothing else. There was, what looked like insane numbers of tiny diamonds making out the majority of the design, but I could see a large number of white pearls and moonstones accenting in places. A set of necklace and earrings of platinum and white opals had been made to match my engagement ring.

And there was a number of rich pieces for my hair that would be put on, on the fateful day.

My shoes were high and as decorated as the dress even though no one could see them under the dress. I looked like a decade of craftmanship. I don't know how this has been achieved in less than a month. Maybe it was an existing dress, or maybe the people Morea hired used magic. Regardless, it was one of the most beautiful things I had ever seen.

— Kaden —

Of course my mother had to make this a national event.

Hundreds of people have been coming to Blakemore in the last few days for the wedding. There were no inns, or hotel left empty in Blakeden. Every packhouse of every of my packs have been

filled, and now there was a small army of people setting up mini temporary towns in either yurts of geodomes all equipped with a wood-burning stove, bed and electricity. Those micro cities, popping all over the place. A few others went to the city outside our territory, renting all the best hotels out.

It was a logistical nightmare.

Given how the Luna Ceremony as gone well at the new location, and how big it was now, it had been decreed the wedding venue.

Of course, my mother decided that a night wedding would be cooler, so the place had been equipped with a bajillion faerie lights, and vines, and exotic flowers from all over the world.

I must admit that when my mother set her mind to it, she can do miracles in a ridiculously short amount of time, and she probably hired a small continent to manage it in time.

Everything was a permanent whirlwind around Blakemore now.

And, of course, everyone saw this as a great opportunity for fucking politics.

“How many exactly?” I asked the room.

“Eleven,” said Alpha Woodcrest.

I pinched my nose with my thumb and forefinger.

Eleven packs we joining Blakemore.

Granted, they were on the smaller side, as none had more than a hundred members, but I could not rule such small territories from a distance safely, which meant that they had to integrate within any of my packs. But that would be a massive influx of people. Nearly a thousand. We did not have the infrastructure for it, as evident by the struggles for the wedding accommodations. It was fewer people coming for the wedding, yet we had to build temporary shelters, and most were not adequate for the coldest part of winter, so this was no long-term option. Most didn’t have running water or sewer lines anyways, meaning that we had to set up temporary bathrooms somewhere for them.

This could do for a week or two of accommodations in autumn, but not permanent through winter.

We needed a solution.

My phone buzzed, I looked at it, dreading what more nightmares were falling on my lap now.

It was from Elaeya.

Land swap. Neighbours.

Thanks, I replied.

And I went to an adjoining room, waving my hand at my men to follow me, leaving the guess back there, and asked Brandon for maps of our territory and adjoining packlands.

We spent the next hours sorting out which neighbour packland were the right size for swaps, then I sent a number of envoys to them all for opening the negotiation channels.

I spend most of the next day on my computer video chatting with each Alphas, negotiating prices and options.

There were a few knocks on my door, late in the evening.

“Yes,” I answered, I was done with my calls for the day as the sun was already down.

“Hey there,” said Darren. “What’s the consensus?”

“Territory-wise, we’ll manage, it’s the structure that I’m a bit more worried.”

“What do you mean?” he asked coming in. He went straight for my fridge and grabbed two brews. He was getting a little too comfortable here, but I joined him on the couch and uncapped mine.

“Every time a small pack was integrated inside any of my packs, one of two things would happen. One would be for the pack to be completely diluted into a bigger pack. The other would be for the pack to stay whole and become an administrative region within another bigger pack. But in both cases, the bigger existing pack is the ruling one.”

“Ah,” he said. “Only now you’re acquiring a whole new territory for them. They’re not being integrated, but making a whole new pack out of them.”

“More or less, but none is much bigger than the other, so I can’t really use the existing power structure on one.”

“Unless you want them to fight for the power,” he concluded.

“Pretty much.”

“So you need a neutral party. A new ranked structure from scratch.”

“Yeah, I don’t see how I can pull this off otherwise without a fight.”

He nodded. “Will they be given administrative control? I mean the existing packs?”

“Most of them are pretty stubborn people who have held on to their independence for longer than most would have. I think a few might fuse together. Probably some of the smallest,” I took a sip. “Some of them do not have more than two or three rank members so they could combine administratively if they wish so. But I doubt they are all fond of fusing all together. Again, that would be more probable if one was a lot bigger than the others.”

“Which means that you’ll need solid people for this.”

"It would help," I admitted.

"You have people in mind?"

"I know of a few of my Alphas who have more kids than available position in their packs. Some are too young, others may not have prepared for it. Not all of them has the ambition either. Ultimately, maybe three or four could fit the bill and be available at the moment."

"You contacted any of them?"

"Not yet. I'm not sure if they're the right fit. Some would probably turn this into a competition."

"Sibling?"

"Some, and cousins, others might not be found of the displacement. It would be a downgrade from what they're used too."

"You mean smaller less fancy packhouse?"

"For one thing. I least until spring. And starting from scratch is a lot of work. I want people ready to get their hand dirty."

"Right," he said.

My phone buzzed.

Don't ask yet, but listen. Darren has the answer. Elaeya sent me.

Damn, she sometimes simplify everything.

"On the plus side, most of them will be around for the wedding, so you might not have too much tracking to do. Alpha Clint Silverstone told me he had no place left to house his daughter today when she came home."

"I thought his kids were away for a few years at least."

He shrugged. "Doesn't seem like it anymore. He said his daughter is coming back."

Clint was a pretty no-nonsense man and had a strict household. Everyone of his children were academically advanced.

"Are there so few Alphas with children without a planned position?"

"Not all families are like yours. Most planned ahead to make sure they have something, if not rank, then a solid position in the pack regardless."

"Man, if me and my brothers has had something like this, it would have changed things." He rubbed at his face. "Then again, I like this job, I'm glad I was available for this. It kinda inspired Fred to get on the prowl for something elsewhere. I think if he finds the right opportunity, he's not gonna wait for a mate. Kev is kinda stuck though. It's hard to find opportunities outside of a pack without getting a mate in the process. Kate is from Stonewillow so—."

"What's her background?"

"He uncle was the Beta for decades, when he died, his father returned to the pack to take his place. She had a pretty decent head on her shoulder, if she didn't have an older brother, she and kev would have done a pretty decent Beta pair."

"Isn't Fred older than Kevin?" I asked.

"Yeah, and he's had some decent education too, they both had their Alpha basics covered, but Fred doesn't deal as well with stress and the unforeseen. Actually, I have difficulty seeing him go out on his own. Him and Kevin has been intensely close since they were toddlers. I think he thinks landing a gamma gig like me would be the best for him, but he has no idea what he's doing. I would not be surprised if he went to scout during the wedding party."

I drank beer thinking.

"What about Kevin, how solid is he?"

"If anything ever happened to Michael, I think he would be the best suited to take over."

"Does Michael have any empty seats to fill?"

"Nah, Stonewillow is not a small pack per se, but it's not big enough to have tons of positions to fill, most positions have been handed down from generation to generation."

I finished my bottle.

"Well, I'd better get home before it's too late or I won't be able to deal with this tomorrow," I told him.

"You're going to work tomorrow?"

"I want this delt with before the wedding." Which was the day after tomorrow.

"So no bachelor party?"

"No, it's not really my thing anyways."

"Dang, and I was hoping to give you one hell of a ride," he said in jest.

I gave him a look. He was becoming as immune to them as Eva. He just put his empty bottle on the coffee table and left waving his hand back at me.

* * * * *

I asked Clint to the conference room.

I looked at Elaeya. We didn't talk about work yesterday. But I kind of did what she asked me too. I knew she had no idea what it meant yet, and I wasn't sure if this would be the right decision, which is probably why I asked her to come with me today. That and too spare her from my sisters, which I knew she appreciated.

“You are doing the right thing,” she told me, seeing I was unsure.

“And do you know what this thing is?”

“No, but it is the right path.”

“All of it?”

She tilted her head, unsure of what I was asking her. “Don’t stop now,” she finally said.

I nodded. I could ask others, but if this was the path, then I will take the plunge.

Clint arrived a little later. He was pretty surprised at what I asked him, but complied, then I sent two texts and made a call, while we waited.

Brandon arrived not long after with maps and also a pile of contracts for me to sign, which I did while we waited for everyone.

Darren came in not long after with his three brothers and Kate. A few minutes later Elisabeth Silvercrest, Clint’s daughter, walked in.

I gave the signed contracts to Brandon and gestured for everyone to take place around the conference table.

They all looked at me curiously.

Elaeya stood next to me, in all confidence.

“Here is a map of all the Blakemore territories,” I said unrolling a large map. I took a sharpie and drew a line around a series of neighboring packlands. “I’ve just acquired those territories, the packs will swap places with a number of packs joining Blakemore to form a new pack,” I said. “If you want to,” I looked at Elizabeth, “I’ll make you Beta of this new pack.”

Her eyes went round, so did her father’s.

I saw Darren’s eyes calculating what was going on, and looking surprised as he figured it out.

“What do you say?” I asked her.

“Yes,” she asked, then hesitated. “Could I ask something unusual Alpha?”

“Yes,” said Elaeya before I could answer. Which I knew meant approval of whatever she was about to ask.

“I know that Beta pairs are couples, but—.” She hesitated again. “I think starting a new pack from scratch is going to be a difficult job to do alone.”

“True,” I conceded.

“Instead of a mate, could my twin sister share this position with me instead?”

“You have to understand that if you do this, when either of you will have mates, they will not inherit any rank.”

“I understand.”

“I believe your sister is abroad though, this pack is happening now.”

“I’m calling her right after this, she’ll be here tomorrow.”

“You’re sure she will accept?”

“Yes.”

Behind her, her father nodded.

“Then I see no objections, unless the new Alpha does.”

I turned to the Thomas’s. Michael’s eyes bulged in realisation.

“Do you have any objection with this?” I asked him.

“What?” he suddenly asked confused.

“Of me offering the position of Alpha and Gamma,” I explain.

“Both?” he asked.

Everyone looked confused but me, Ela, Darren and Michael.

“The offer is on the table,” I told him.

He took a long inspiration and looked at his brothers, Darren nodded approvingly.

“You have my blessing,” he told me.

“Kevin Thomas, Kate Mansell, if you want it, I offer the position of Alpha and Luna of this pack.”

Kate slapped her hands on her mouth as she let out a surprised squealed. Kevin, just like Fred had both their mouth hanging open.

“It would require immediate relocation. The territories are combined small pack territories, there will be a lot of adjustment in the first year. I’m not sure I can guarantee a new central packhouse before winter. We will do what we can, but the relocation of everyone will take precedence over luxuries. Are you interested?”

Kevin just stared at me. Kate slapped him on the arm to have him snap out of it.

“Yes,” she said.

“Yes,” he finally echoed.

“You have objections about your beta’s demands?” I asked.

“None,” said Kevin. Kate shook her head.

“Frederic Thomas, I can offer you the position of Gamma if you want it.”

“Yes,” he said before I had even finished talking.

“Okay,” I said. “That’s settled. Now let’s go and meet the pack.”

— Chapter Sixty-Six —

WORDS HAVE POWER

— Kaden —

Of course the Brotherhood had sent a bunch of ultimatums to most of my allies, which explained why a lot of uninvited guess showed up asking for an audience.

I didn't get the news of this until Jean-Philippe told me. Somehow the fact that he and my sister were mates seemed to have eluded the Brotherhood, which was weird considering how little control they had, even in public.

When Jasmine saw her boyfriend arrive the day before the wedding, she ran to him and spent most of the day with her lips glued to his.

It had been a good thing that I'd gotten the information I needed before then.

I spend most of the day sorting the new pack.

It was still unnamed, but everyone had accepted the new ranked members. And Jayson was organising things for the rest of the day as my mother dragged me away in the late afternoon.

"We need to finish fitting your suit for tomorrow," she had told me as she apologized to the packs and took me away.

Elaeya inclined her head to us in goodbye and went to do, I don't know what.

Mom took me to one of the drawing room to see Morea.

"I think the two of you are well matched," she told me as she helped me put the jacket on.

"I think so too," I said.

"Any cold feet?" she asked.

"No, just wished we had more time to appreciate the moment, but I'm not so sure we'll have a lot of that for a while."

She pursed her lips.

"You've told her, right?" she asked smoothing the fabric on my back.

"Told what?"

She stopped moving. I looked over my shoulder, she looked like she wanted to punch me.

"What?" I asked.

"That you love her, idiot."

“She knows this already,” I told her.

“Please tell me she knows because you told her.”

“I didn’t need to, she already knew.”

She started hitting me on the arm, and it was not soft slapped either. I don’t ever remember having my mother hit me.

“Ow,” I whined. “Mom, what is wrong with you?”

“What is wrong with me?” she asked clearly upset. “What is wrong with you? What did I do to make such an idiotic man?”

“Hey,” I complained. “She’s not an idiot you know, she can sort things out on her own.”

“Of course, she’s brilliant. And it’s written all over your face that you love her.”

“So what is wrong then.”

“Saying it is not the same thing, Kaden. Words make everything different.”

I looked at her incredulously.

“Words have power,” Morea said.

* * * * *

“Man, this place is pure chaos,” said Alik to Sam.

Both were chilling with a beer on the terrace looking at everyone running around like headless chickens.

I shook my head at the view, happy that I was done with the fitting.

“What has gotten to you?” Sam asked me.

I shook my head again. “I’ve just gotten an earful of the so-called power of words.”

“That’s a thing?” he asked.

“Yes, it is,” said Alik. “Words have power, that’s why most spells have words, why oats and promises should not be broken lightly. It’s why you wolves’ claiming works to begin with.”

“Huh?” said Sam. “You learn something new every day.”

I frowned, but nodded at the men and left.

— Elaeya —

“Hey,” Kaden told me as he came in late for dinner. He kissed me on the cheek.

“Hey,” I told him back.

“How has been things so far?”

“Okay, Alik suggested training my magic.”

“As he?”

I nodded.

“What would that mean?”

“I’m not sure yet. He thinks I could need more in-depth knowledge. I’ve been mostly operating on instincts. Most of what I know is not beyond the skill of a witch, the rest I do without knowing.” He put his hands around my waist which had me bend my neck back to look at him. “He thinks it could help me. I’m not sure the scale of what this could mean, but I trust him.”

“I do too. He’s more than proved himself.”

I nodded.

“When would this start?”

I shrugged. “He said it could start with some book recommendations, a few exercises fitting in both our tight schedules and then see how much we can do from there.”

He nodded. “Sounds fine to me.”

I smiled at him.

“Nervous?” he asked.

“Tremendously,” I admitted. “But also happy.”

That got him smiling. “Are you hungry?”

“I’ve already eaten,” I admitted. “You?”

“I had a bite during the fittings,” he said with a devilish smile.

I titled my head questioningly.

“I think there we should get going before someone decides to separate us for the night.” He bent down and swung me over his shoulder.

I giggled instantly.

“Besides, I’ve been told we have to talk,” he said as he marched us upstairs.

“About what?” I asked.

“If you don’t know yet, then I’m definitely not gonna give you a hint.”

* * * * *

A lot of people decided to drag Kaden and I in separate direction today. They marched inside the home like a herd of rhinoceros which woke us up groggy, and they barged inside our room uninvited. We barely managed to shoo them away to let us dress up, before he was taken I don't know where.

Shae and Celia took the lead of this sisterhood of she-wolves. Eva, Nadine, Jasmine, Lisa, Gwen, and Amy were there, as were Kate and Ana, Timothy's mate. She looked like she was trying really hard to enjoy herself.

At the request of Eva, I was whisked away to a spa in Blakeden where we were all given massages, manicures and pedicures. Ylva was shadowing me, but she's refused to be fondled by a bunch of strangers.

I did notice that they did not manage to drag my mother into this. I was sure she had used the last minute preparation of the wedding as an excuse.

"We couldn't even give you a bachelorette party," complained Eva, her voice muffled by the towel under her face, as a skilled masseur was working on her back.

"I never needed that," I said.

"It's not because you don't need it that it means you can't have it."

"Are you saying this because this is what you want?" I asked her, which elicited a few snickers.

"Bingo," said Nadine.

"I would have been fine with a small discrete celebration. I don't need all this. I am not doing it because I want to, but because it is asked of me and I understand the meaning and significance behind this," I said.

"You understand responsibilities well for your age," said Celia.

"It doesn't mean that responsibilities can't be enjoyable. I can assure you it will be lovely," said Shae.

"I am sure," I admitted.

"It scares Darren," said Eva.

"What?" asked Nadine.

"The wedding, I think he thinks this is a little too much for him," Eva said. "He doesn't say much, but he's not used to that much of, well everything."

"It's a lot to adjust to," I admitted.

"If both of you want something smaller, it can happen honey," said Shae. "But you have to understand that none of my kids will elope for a drunken wedding at an Elvis chapel in Vegas."

That got a few laughers.

“I want a princess wedding,” said Jasmine.

After we had been pampered enough, we all had our hair done, and makeup.

I never thought preparing for a single event could take an entire day.

— Kaden —

My mother had organised for me to prepare for the whole day. Which was obviously ridiculous. I was pretty sure I could escape for half a day before a searching party was sent. I tried to sneak off, but it didn’t seemed to work, especially after they ceased my phone.

I nearly ordered them otherwise, but I realised using my power again people whom my mother used her power on, was probably not the kindest thing to do to them.

Then I thought of mindlink. That was such a novel thing, I didn’t think of using it most of the time, but Elaeya and I have been practicing last night, among other things.

So I connected with the wizard.

A few minutes later, the world dimmed and he appeared before me, put his finger on his lips, telling me to be silent, and signed me to follow him.

We walked out as quietly as possible, which can be pretty darn silent with the right efforts, while everyone in the room went mad as they realised I had just disappeared.

“So that’s a veil?” I asked him once we were away.

“Yep,” he said.

“Make sure to hide my scent so they don’t track me all morning, and I’ll pay in alcohol.”

He extended a hand to me. “You got yourself a deal,” he said as I shook his hand.

Eventually, we sneaked to one of the old unused buildings in the woods where I’d sneak up when I needed a break as a kid. Sam brought us food and coffee, my grandfather joined us with cognac, my uncle Nolan brought brandy, my father some more Brandy, and my cousin Soren brought entertainment. Nathan, Travis and Williams were there too. Darren managed to sneak in took.

It was a lot more low key than a bachelor party, but we had fun while it lasted, until someone tracked us.

“Hey, you should have told me, I would have been the life of the party,” said Mishka as he sneaked in.

“How the hell did you track us?” asked Alik. I was curious too.

“I didn’t track him,” he said pointing his thumb at me. “I tracked you,” he pointed his index at Alik.

“How?” he asked aghast.

“Trade secret,” he said. “Anyways, I’m here to tell you everyone is going batshit crazy and I thought it would be a good idea to inform you before the news reached the women that you disappeared.”

My father winced. I got up.

“Party’s up,” I told the guys.

I had been careful not to drink too much as I thought it might send the wrong message to go to my wedding hammered, but not everyone had been so reasonable.

I smirked as I watched them struggle and slipped out.

The rest of the day was mostly to make me look not too bad beside Elaeya. I didn’t had to know what she’d wear to know she’d look incredible, she’d look incredible wearing a sac of potato, or just plain naked. Especially naked.

As long as I didn’t made her ashamed, then it should be fine.

I’m not bad looking, I know that, but I probably look too scruffy to model. Which might be why my mother had me shaved and my hair cut shorter.

I had been all over the place in the last, at least, six months, so I started to look like a caveman.

I guess she thought I could do better than this.

The air was sharp on my newly shaved face. Maybe I should have shaved only after the winter.

I put on my black suit, glad that no one tried to put me in a tux.

And then I left for the venue to see just how powerful words can be.

— Chapter Sixty-Seven —

ARE YOU REALLY ABOUT TO DO THIS NOW?

— Elaeya —

I took long inspirations, letting it out slowly.

I knew this was the place I should be, it didn't change the fact that thousands of people were waiting for me. People, in most cases, I had never seen, and that came here with expectations.

My father rolled his chair in. He was wearing an elegant suit, his hair perfect, his beard trimmed. I had never seen him look this sharp. He beamed at me when he saw me.

He just opened his arms wide with a smile, his jaw tightly closed and his eyes watery.

I bent to hug him, but my dress was restraining my movements so much, and it ended up being easier to sit on his lap that to bend forward so low. He rocked me a little.

"I cannot believe how things have changed so fast, how you have grown so much. It was not so long ago that I would rock you like this and you would fit in my arms," he told me.

I was careful not to mess my hair or anything else as I laid my head on his shoulder.

"You are so beautiful," he said.

"Thank you," I said. "It was a lot of work."

He laughed a little. "I'm sure it was."

I just indulged in this hug for a while, closing my eyes. We have not indulged in many displays of affection in the past. There were always other more important things to do, get food, raise shelter, runaway, train, always something.

But right now, there was nothing else. It was my father and his little girl, so much taller than she felt, enjoying each others company.

There were a few people that came, probably to make me do one thing or another, to correct my already perfect hair, or check for preparation. But each and every one of them turned around or went past us once they saw us.

I appreciated the gesture.

It was like being inside a gigantic bee hive, everyone busy buzzing in all directions.

"I worked hard on something today," he told me. "I thought it could be better than the wheelchair."

I straightened my spine, allowing him to reach behind his chair and grab two lofstrands crutches. He had used crutches before. His legs were not completely paralysed, they just could hardly support his weight, and I supposed he didn't feel like wheeling himself in on my wedding day.

I smiled at him.

I knew it would probably be harder on him than the wheelchair, but I could understand and respect his pride.

Kaden's grandparent, followed by his parents, uncle and aunt and my mother had marched into the venue from the same place I would, signaling to everyone that things were about to begin. I could hear applause and the cracking of cameras everywhere on the other side of our makeshift room.

The ranked members of Blakemore had followed—except family—then followed by every Alpha couple of the packs of Blakemore. Between each group there would be pauses, some music—everything was official and formal.

When the music changed the last couples began walking in one after the others.

Darren and Eva were first. A friend of Kaden named David accompanied, Nadine. Sam accompanied a giggling Lisa, then Jasmine and Jean-Philippe. Gwen came in with her boyfriend Alfie who looked like it was the greatest thing in the world to ever happen to him, and greeted the picture takers like a celebrity. Amy was accompanied by her cousin Soren, who was around Kaden's age and they chatted all the way. Soren's sisters were next. Emani, who was recently divorced came alone with her two-year-old daughter throwing flowers everywhere to everyone's cooing. And Naomi, the youngest of the three came holding Emani's young son.

I straightened my father's tie and wrapped my arm around his, careful not to impede his progress with the crotches.

We walked in when it was our time. The camera shutters clacking in a cacophony that made the music little more than static in the background, then I spotted Kaden.

He had ditched the beard and shaggy hair that was nearly all the way to his shoulders to a shorter, cleaner cut. It made him nearly unrecognizable, but his eyes were the same, and they were glued on me, and they spoke to me not of what this moment was, but of what usually comes after. My belly clenched and legs tightened instinctively.

I could not stop myself from smiling, and everything else in this room faded.

At one point my hand was put in his, and the same electricity that I had felt the first time we had met and every other times we had touched was still there, immutable, like an eternal truth that would shroud the rest of my life that this was my place.

I barely listened to whomever was speaking.

We did all that was asked of us, all the words, and everything. It mattered little to me. What mattered was that we were there together, it could have been in a desolated land or in the midst of a storm, we could have been dressed in rags with no more than the moon as witness, and it would have still been right.

Instead, in was in a gorgeous clearing, with fairy lights everywhere and more projected in the barren trees giving a magical look to the scene. The night was beautiful, the supermoon bright, the sky cloudless. Vines with flowers of purple and red adorned every section. Everyone was dressed for the red carpet, impeccable and graceful.

The path to the altar and been paved with large quartz stones so that I could walk unimpeded in my footwear. There are surely grand hotels not as luxurious as this forest was tonight.

We kissed to much applause and shutters clicking and flashing in all directions.

The place was soon transformed into a reception hall, under the night sky.

“Will we have to dance?” I muttered at Kaden from behind my teeth.

“Stars and night, I hope not,” he muttered back. “I can’t dance to save my life.”

“I cannot help you either,” I told him.

He looked around, then gave me a wolfish smile.

I quivered.

He bent down and took me in his arms to the surprise of the few beside us.

“Start the party without us?” he said. “We’ll join you later.”

And he took me away to laughter and catcalls.

I tried to get hold of the train so it would not drag on the dirt ground as we left the venue for the more secluded woods.

“Are you really about to do this now?” I asked appalled.

“You can’t be wearing that and not have me thinking about it,” he said matter-of-factly.

I was probably in no position to argue.

When we reached somewhere secluded enough, he put me down.

I looked at him questioning his plan. There were trees, a few big rocks, definitively nothing of comfort.

“At least we’ll skip any possibilities of dances,” he said.

That had me smiling. “Well, you better think carefully about this because I am probably wearing a small country’s GDP. I cannot damage it, what if they want their GDP back.”

“Can’t have a country’s GDP rolling in the mud,” he agreed and he pressed his hands on me, turning me around to undress me.

“And I did not dress by myself. I am fairly sure I cannot put this back on, on my own.”

“I’ll help,” he said pressing his lips on my neck.

“Then look at what you are doing, because it would be embarrassing to call on your mother to come and help me dress back up.”

That had him hesitate. He fondled with my dress for a while.

“How does this work?” he asked me, clearly struggling.

I couldn’t help it, I had a giggling fit.

“Maybe just get this up,” he said about my skirt which obviously wouldn’t work as the upper part was so tight, but I just kept giggling, unable to tell him.

Seeing it was not working, and I was not helping, he gave me a look, which only had me giggling some more.

He didn’t look as amused as I was.

I kissed him, trying to calm myself down, and cheer him up, which worked perfectly and rapidly I was tearing at his clothes.

He pulled his head away from mine.

“It’s not the greatest idea to work me up if we can’t take care of that dress,” he told me.

I suppress further giggles as I thought of how things went and I focused my mind on the task. It took me a while to be serious enough, but I managed to focus enough to guide him a little, and he figured the rest on his own.

It took us a lot longer than expected and he deposited the dress carefully on one of the cleanest-looking boulders.

“How do we process now?” I asked him. He turned his head and took the sight of me in, carefully, his eyes ablaze.

“Please don’t mess my hair,” I begged as her got closer.

“Yes, Mam,” he said and kissed me.

We figured it out.

— Kaden —

The evening was a grand affair. We returned after a fashion to a lot of applause. Elaeya blushed, it was cute on her.

We ate, people partied. And we would be interrupted all evening by guests asking for short audiences. We had to get used to it quickly, and Ela took everything in stride. She never complained about anything not working out how she imagined it, not that I ever heard what she imagined for a wedding or if she even imagined anything. It's just that being raised with six sisters, I had heard those talks before.

But everything was uncomplicated with her tonight.

She was perfect.

She met my extended family. My maternal grandparent and their family came, my niece and nephew came to eat cake with us. And there were probably enough gifts for us to make opening them up a full-time job for two weeks straight.

I had kind of hoped I could delay everything for a while and run off with her for a couple of weeks to some remote island, but it was evident it would not happen, and with everyone here, it led to more business talks that I would have liked.

We finally went to bed late and exhausted, but we knew the following days would be more work than leisure with our guests here. But I was glad I would not be facing this alone.

— Chapter Sixty-Eight —

AN ALARM

— Darren —

“Have the forensic team arrived?” I asked my brother Michael.

“Yeah, they’re here already,” he replied.

It had been three weeks since the wedding. Michael returned home alone. Ana has been living with Eva and me, and was doing a little better. Kevin, Kate and Fred were settling in their new temporary packhouse for the winter. The packs were moving each in their own places. There would be tons of readjustments, but the nights were getting colder now, and we kept the workers focused on repairs and making everything function for the cold season, and using that time to prepare for spring and the full remodel of the territory to fit it to everyone’s needs.

I never expected Kaden to ask my brothers, but I was glad he did. I was a little sad that Michael was so far from all his siblings, but I knew he was also appreciating that everyone was settling and growing into their own.

Fred met Veronica, Elizabeth’s twin sister, and they were now an item. They weren’t mates, but things seemed to be going well.

Michael finally found what my brother’s murderers were looking for, in our utility room, they’re tried to connect something to the network, probably to better spy on Stonewillow. But they’d been dragged out of there. Only, there was some DNA left behind, a possibly good sample too.

It was well hidden which is why we didn’t find it at first, but now we had it, and If Elaeya said we had to find this, then it meant if was important. Might even crack the case.

Things were getting slowly hotter in Stonewillow, and by that, I didn’t mean the weather, but the heat was there. A lot of packs have had very similar attacks to my brother’s pack. The fact that Michael was now backed by Blakemore and that three of his brothers were ranked members under Blakemore, had not fallen into deaf ears.

In a way, this was helping him build a few alliances, in others it was attracting bad or unnecessary attention. He had to be very careful. Everyone wanted a piece of the pie, and the instability in the region only heightened the situation.

I was worried about him.

I wanted my whole family safe. I knew that getting my brothers here was probably one of the best things to do to protect them, and I knew Michael thought exactly the same, but it also left him more vulnerable.

It had been rough to announce to my parents that all four of them—including their daughters-in-laws—were not coming back, and I didn't envy my brother's position.

Blakemore sent more warriors to Stonewillow to stabilize things as much as possible. Eva and I might go back in a few weeks to sort more things there, but we tried to take our time with this.

"How are you doing?" I asked Michael worried

There's another thing that has hit him pretty hard.

When he met Elaeya, she caught him looking at all the couple, and told him to stop waiting as he had no mate. He didn't show it, but I knew it hurt him, nearly as much as losing his brothers.

There are not many reasons for someone to not have any mates, and the main reason is usually that she had already died. And deep down, he was mourning a woman he had never met. Giving his state of mind, he was not in a good place.

I talked to my mother, for her to look after him. I knew he would not have told her otherwise, and Dad was not the rock he used to be when we were kids. He was in a dark place of his own. His greatest wealth, his pack, business, and sons, were gone. Michael owned everything now and he was the last son around.

I didn't feel great about how things were with him. He hadn't always been the best father, but he was the only father I had, and I wanted us to talk again, and for him and Mom to be here for my wedding next summer. I wanted them to meet their future grandchildren.

The most difficult things with my father had always been linked to the responsibilities on his shoulders, but they were gone now, and I wanted both my parents to be able to enjoy retirement, travel, have activities, have fun, live.

But, as I thought about it, the best thing I could do now is to finish this bloody war now, as soon as possible, talk with my father, and begin to rebuild the burnt bridges one by one.

"I'm fine," lied Michael.

I have no idea what I can do for Michael though. I don't know how I can help, other than stabilise the situation for him.

I suddenly felt really lonely for him, and there was nothing I could do.

— Eveline —

"So," I said. "Here is the last one to sign."

My brother took the form and looked at it.

"Where is Elaeya?" I asked him.

"Around," he said. "She's really popular these days."

"Luna work?" I asked.

"Yeah, I don't want things to become too much for her, but she keeps telling me to stop worrying and focus on stabilizing the situation and finishing the packs transfer," he said, still scanning the documents.

"I'm glad things are going well with her."

He looked up and smiled at me. He smiled a lot more now. Genuine smiles too. It looked good on him.

"When will be the Honeymoon?" I asked.

He furrowed his brows. "I'd like to plan, but I'm not so sure it's a good idea, neither think Ela, so I don't know."

"That's not really romantic," I said sitting down in front of him.

He shrugged. "It's not like that's what I want, but there has to be compromises."

"I guess."

"I'd like to send you to Mystriver," he told me.

"Is everything okay with David?"

"I'm not sure. He was evasive last we talked, but given how things have gone lately—."

"I get it."

"Are you okay with this? I haven't sent you this far since Ghealach."

"I'm okay."

"I don't think I can spare Darren at the moment."

I nodded. "I can go on my own."

"You'll have a team. Security," he assured me.

An idea popped up in my head. "What if I bring in Nadine?"

"She hasn't been doing that type of work yet."

"No, but she's doing well. Actually, I'm starting to think that I might give her my secretarial job, with all the gamma work, and if I keep doing ambassador work, maybe it would be easier this way. But, I mean, I learned a ton travelling to various packs, and it's a good change of pace from the office, and maybe I could use our spare time to brief her on the job."

"You think she's solid enough?"

"I think she's doing better than I did when I started up."

He nodded. “Okay, if she wants it, then we can do the transfer. You want an office?”

“Can I have my own?” I asked excitedly.

“You could be entitled to one if you want it.”

I clapped my hands exhilarated. “This is awesome,” I said getting up. Then I rushed to my brother to give him tons of kisses.

“Eva! Cut that out!” he ordered, but I kept at it.

“For crying out loud, are you a grown ass woman or a toddler?” there was no malice in the words and I knew that deep down, he was probably happy.

“Thanks, big brother,” I told him when I finally quit. There was lipstick on his cheeks. “You might want to clean that out before your wife sees you.” I pointed at his face.

He growled and moved to his bathroom to wash the makeup off.

“Thanks again,” I told him. “Give me words when you want me at Mystriver.”

He grunted some sort of acknowledgement, and I left him cheerfully to his brooding.

— Mishka —

My smart watch pinged.

I looked at it.

“Sorry guys, I have to drop this,” I told the room. “Now you might have a chance to win.”

Someone smacked me on the back of the head.

“Fucker,” another complained.

I moved out joyfully whistling ‘Don’t Worry, Be Happy’.

Someone amicably slammed the door behind me.

I like them too.

I went straight to my room in the barracks, moved the bed aside and opened my smaller safe, which was connected to my secured laptop. I pulled the computer out, still connected to its wires and flipped it open.

I had a few programs working at the moment and I went to see what could have triggered an alarm.

I scanned everything carefully. It was not coming from the programs. I could not have detailed notifications with this setup and it was a pain. I should probably upgrade this up. I’m sure the boss would finance the upgrade if I asked nicely enough.

I found something in my emails.

From a reliable source.

Fucking fuck!

I shoved everything in the safe and locked it up in a hurry.

I considered sending a text or mindlink, but I thought this was better said in person, so I rushed out to the office building.

“Emergency,” I told Mark as I passed his desk. He didn’t stop me.

I knocked on the boss’s door and barged in. He was on the phone and raised his finger to tell me to wait a minute.

“Nope, you don’t want that,” I told him as I closed the door behind me.

He saw the seriousness of the situation in my face.

“I have to go, I’ll call you later to confirm,” he said in the receiver and hung up.

“There is a hit on your wife,” I said without preamble.

He got straight up.

“When?”

“Found out just now. Don’t know how long it has been, but it’s on her I’m sure.”

“What does it say?”

“Hybrid, spirit wolf, young, fertile, under Blakemore, needs to travel fast, considerations.”

“What does the last part means exactly?”

“Make her disappear and you’ll get favours.”

He knew as well as me that favours in our world can be worth a lot more than money. The first part of the message was the hook, the next one the bid.

He blinked, then grabbed his cellphone in a hurry. Something was wrong.

“What?”

“She didn’t answer my mindlink,” he said. “Nor the phone.” He added hanging up.

Then his eyes widened and he rushed out.

I ran behind him trying to keep up.

“What is it?” I asked as I jumped in the car after him. I saw people around us hurrying. He probably linked them as he ran out.

"There has been a strange illness going on near the border. That's where Ela is," he said pulling in gears and spitting gravel as he drove off at the maximum speed the engine could handle.

"It's right next to the Southern swamps. If there is a single place in all of Blakemore that could be a risk potential, it's the swamps. No one would infiltrate Blakemore proper, but if they could make her go there—."

"Then they could make a snatch and grab."

— Chapter Sixty-Nine —

ALL HELL BROKE LOOSE

— Ylva —

“That’s odd,” I told Elaeya.

“I know,” she replied.

This was the third house we went too and the symptoms were all the same. Only the children were affected. Their lives were not in danger or the doctors would not have sent them back, but it was still odd. I had no idea what Elaeya could do, but I’ve seen her do enough incredible things to know that it was worth it to let her have a go at this.

“Are there any other symptoms?” she asked the mother.

“No,” she said.

Just like every other parents.

Elaeya was sitting on the bed next to the feverish boy, until she jumped up, looking around us a little wildly.

That got my senses on edge.

Anything that made her react like this was not good, but she said nothing so I assumed she didn’t know yet.

I signed for her to leave where she was and rushed out.

I got my gun out and scanned every room I moved through.

I kept trying to connect through mindlink with the guys but there was nothing. I tried Kaden. Nothing either.

I picked my phone, no bars.

Kaden has made sure no matter how secluded some part of his territory can be, nothing is out of communication reach.

A scrambler then?

Can one work with mindlink?

That would probably mean some kind of magic.

Elaeya got out of the room with the mother and her son in her arms.

I signed for them to stop, she shook her head. “We need to evacuate everyone around,” she muttered.

“Someone cut us up.”

Her face paled but she nodded.

“We secure travel one house at a time and get them out,” she said, but she stopped as I cracked the door open, just like I did. We could both smell this, blood.

There was more than one source, I was sure of it.

“The illness,” said Elaeya, her eyes like reflective spheres. “It was made. It is a trap. It is a spell.” She blinked her eyes a few times getting back to their natural colours, but it darkened in a second a two to a nigh blood red with little flicker of magenta in there. “They hurt children,” she said her voice colder than I ever heard it.

“Let me scout,” I said.

“Back door,” she said. “I’ll move ahead to the next house. Don’t linger,” she told me.

I nodded.

It’s one of the worst things in the book for a bodyguard to separate from the target. But I also learned to trust that woman. If she says what we’re doing, then that’s what we’re doing.

I track the first blood trail quickly. I stayed focused, my weapon ready, it led me to a corpse. Dodson’s. His throat had been slashed deep enough for the wound to expose the bones. He never had the time to scream.

I looked at him for no more than three seconds then I was gone on the next trail.

I found Finn, one of the kindest men I’ve ever met with glassy eyes in a bush. He had been dragged there. I saw no wounds but a few scratches that probably came from the bush’s thorns, but he was clearly dead.

I decided not to track the others.

I thought of Hugo and Anders.

Giving the situation, the risk was high that they were gone too, so I went to the next house. I could not track Elaeya, she was probably hiding herself and her scent. Only the scent of when we originally came still lingered.

She was not at the next house, but it was empty, so I deduced that she went for the next house like she suggested.

As I furtively approached, I got hit by a massive wall of air that felt like a training mat, pushing me five meters back. I heard the ‘fft’, ‘fft’, ‘fft’ of bullets hitting the ground where I’d just been, the shots silent, probably coming from long distance sniper rifles, too far to hear.

Elaeya just saved my ass.

“Get them to safety,” I heard her mutter.

People rushed through the house and popped on the other side, running away.

During that time, I heard soft footsteps rush to me, invisible. She was coming to veil me with her.

“Run,” she said.

I didn’t wait as I head the bullets hit the ground.

Then the scream of a child froze my body cold.

“Mammmmaaaaa!”

There was more than one sniper, and they were shooting at the others too.

Elaeya’s steps stopped, I heard a low sound, maybe a word in a language I didn’t know, and instantaneously a massive wall of wind rose and swept past us and hit the tress and water of the swamps so hard the weakest trees bent and broke.

Then another word and everything that was dried vegetation still left standing caught fire.

We heard a few screams of pain coming from that direction.

She got to them.

I turned to look at her. I could see her.

I guess she can’t attack and hide at the same time.

Pain went through my leg and I jerk away.

“Leave now,” I told her.

I was shot. She should have left me there to run, but she grabbed my hand to help me.

I could still run. It was a bitch to do it, but the bullet mostly probably went through the muscle, sparing the bone. It hurt bad, obviously, but I’ve fought with worse.

More screams came from the group ahead. I heard a few shifts and werewolves growls, one that turned into a horrifying whine.

She raised her hand and did something that I couldn’t see in that direction. The cries were attracting attention from the nearest homes, and people were rushing to help.

“EVACUATE,” she screamed at them. I saw a few men rush to help with the kids and the injured. Black figures were coming in, but some were thrown back, one at a time, Elaeya’s doing I assumed. One of the wolves—one of the mothers—when after them enraged.

They were targeting them more than us.

It didn't make sense.

What would they benefit from attacking farmers, when Elaeya was here, and a much better target? And then it clicked.

She focused on protecting them, she can't protect them and herself at the same time. I took my sword out in my left hand, while keeping my gun in my right. I should have found a better replacement for the sword I lost at the hospital, I thought.

And then I realised something else.

I'm not an expert at magic, but there's one thing that I know, it's that magic is finite. No one can toss around spell and evocation endlessly, eventually, she'll need to rest and recharge. And if she spent all her magic on protecting vulnerable targets, then she'll have nothing left for herself.

I took her arm and pulled her away.

"Ylva," she complained.

"They're after you," I said. "They cursed the kids to get you here and now they attack them to have you spend everything on protecting them."

She gave a look at the people under attack but followed me.

"I can't do nothing."

"Staying close will condemn them."

"What if I can stop them?"

"I'm sure there's more lurking in wait for when you try."

She slowed her pace. Clearly torn between options. I stopped a few paces away from her, and all hell broke loose.

— Elaeya —

Bullets flew everywhere around us, and nearly all of them were hitting Ylva.

I instinctively raised a shield between her and the onslaught.

The moment I did, I felt pain hit me everywhere, but it did not go any further than skin deep.

I spared a brief look.

Darts.

I did some of the toughest kinetomancy I've ever done, especially given the circumstances. I opened the door of our car from a distance and extended my sense, like one long invisible hand, grabbing Ylva by the midriff and shoving her twenty meters away inside the car.

My body was turning numb.

I knew I had little time.

If I could save only one, I thought as the imprint of the blood-soaked Ylva echoes in my retinas.

I trigger the most complex enchantment I've ever done without any preparation and I aimed it at the ground around the car. Large vines rose and twirled tightly around the metal, locking it in place.

The black silhouettes were coming closer to me.

I could hear screams and roars in the distance.

I focused all my pain, and all my anger, and sadness, and I raised a finger at the closest enemy.

I received a few more darts, but I watched satisfied as his head exploded in a mass of gore, the body limply falling down. The others barely hesitated.

I was on my knees now.

I spit another word and another man's head exploded. As another kicked me in the chest. My muscles refused to respond.

I used another word and the one who kicked me fell on the ground, holding his head between his hands. It did not explode but I knew it was still crushing his brain, my energy waning, while another took his place and wrapped a collar around my neck.

The pain was immediate and absolute and I barely notice as he injected something in me.

My vision blurred until everything was nothing but darkness.

— Chapter Seventy —

WE'LL DO WHAT WE CAN

— Kaden —

I had opened the window on the way. The wind was glacial, but it allowed me to smell the air. It was the most horrible thing that I could have done to myself as I smelt it before I arrived, still in the car, unable to do anything but drive and try not to crash myself into a tree.

It didn't take long for Mishka to smell the it too.

I sent a mindlink to everyone I could that would be relevant to this but it wasn't long until I realise as I got closer than the links were now cut.

"Take your phone and call the cavalry," I ordered Mishka. I had already contacted many, but I wanted more.

"Jammer," he said. "Phone lines cut."

I just squeezed my jaw tighter as the smell of blood got to us.

Everything was a mess.

I could smell Elaeya blood on the grounds as I parked the car.

It didn't smell like a massive amount but my heart was beating at thrice the normal rhythm already.

"Fuck," said Mishka.

I turned around to look at the massive amount of vegetation in the middle of the driveway.

"Ylva is in there," he said.

Which is when I realised there was a car in the middle of what amounted to half a kilometer of vines wrapped around the metal frame.

People came in joining us into trying to get Ylva out. Some guys found a chainsaw somewhere.

"I want to know what has been going on here," I asked a few of my detective as they came in and I gave the same order to Alik the second he joined us.

We found bodies.

Every time someone called for a body, my heart stopped until I was told it wasn't her.

Nine children—the oldest was seven, the youngest eight months old—laid at my feet.

My throat was tight.

I watched, numb as they brought more bodies.

Most women. A few men.

They found one that had jumped into the well to hide, but had been shot regardless.

In the end there were two kids who ran further into the wood towards the inner territory and were found late in the evening, tired, dehydrated, but alive.

One man had hid a toddler under his body, saving the child. The man had been shot, but I would learn the next day that he would survive.

When Mishka took Ylva out of the car, she was a bloody mess, and he rushed her out of there in his arms. She had been breathing, but given the amount of blood around, I wasn't sure if she would make it.

Elaeya had not been in the car with her, but I was sure she had been the one putting Ylva there, using the conjured vines to protect her.

We found the rest of her security details.

Dodson was dead.

Finn was dead.

Hugo was dead.

Anders was found alive. He had wrapped fabric around his lashed neck, paled as a sheet. He died on his way to the hospital. The doctors tried everything they could. I saw it in his eyes before he left. He knew it was coming.

I tracked Elaeya's smell to the swamps until the water hid her smell along with that of those who took her.

Were found more than a few of them dead.

Six had been mauled by a wolf, two had no heads, one has had a massive brain hemorrhage. Three were burned alive along with a lot of trees. We also found one floating in the water with a broken spine. Three had been shot dead, but we found blood of more of them.

They had been ready to discard their men to get to what they wanted.

At least half of their corpses had been ghouls, a few shifters, others I was not sure.

They took her away from within my own territory.

It was the first attack within the land of Blakewoods or Blakemore in the last one hundred and nine years. Over a century of peace. I own one of the most dangerous and well-protected packs in the world, and they took our Luna.

"They took my wife," I spat, punching the side of the car. It moved sideways two meters.

Everyone around me cleared.

“They fucking took my wife,” I cursed kicking the car door that dented further. The car was pushed into the ditch, landing sideways.

“We’ll find her,” said Sam coming closer, but keeping a safe distance regardless.

“I will lay waste to this fucking continent,” I said dangerously.

“Kade,” said Sam very carefully. “I think you should calm down now,” he said with the same tone you use to a mad shooter with a gun.

“Calm down?” I seethed, my voice even lower.

Sam pointed at the ground at my feet.

There was a thick black opaque mist like squid’s ink floating low on the ground and spreading around me.

It should have disturbed be at the very least, but I just looked at it curiously for a few seconds.

I saw someone approach in my peripheral, but stopped dead in his tracks.

I looked up, it was the wizard.

“Oh, boy,” he muttered, his eyes a little big.

“What is this?” Sam asked him.

“He’s growing into his new found power,” he replied. “And he’s really, really angry,” he added taking a slow step back.

“What do you know?” I tried to make my voice a little softer. It was probably not the best idea to terrify those that could help me find her.

Alik nodded but didn’t step forward. I noticed distractedly that the mist was slowly dissipating.

“I found a series of crystals,” he said. “They used them to limit magic. She managed to use some regardless, but it limited external connections. She couldn’t call up spirits, for example. They couldn’t use mindlinks either. They probably prepared for a vitteraï, not a sorceress. A lot of their dead were killed by magic, so a good guess is that she fought back hard.” He walked a little closer now that the mist was mostly gone.

“Your guys found tranq darts. That’s probably how they got to her, that and attacking everyone else, making her defence spread thin.”

My joints in my hands creaked as I contracted my fists.

“The good thing is that they put a lot of effort into getting her alive. No one found a lot of blood from her. Not even enough for me to use it in a tracking spell.”

“Could her track her?” I asked, desperate.

“They took her over water. They had some magical defences too, I’m sure they plan for all sorts of tracking. We’ll do what we can,” he said.

“You can use blood to track?”

“Yes, But I need more than a drop.”

“Some of them have been injured, could you track them instead?”

“I already tried. Either they’re dead, or they took serious measures.”

I looked away. I needed another idea.

“We’re not out of options yet,” he said.

I turned sharply. “Like what?”

“We’ll figure it out.”

Useless wizard.

I knew the type of things that were done to her kind. The words I had read on pages months ago were resonating in my skull. What were they doing to her? Had it already begun? Even if I could find her, would there be anything left for me to save?

I walked away, deep into the woods. I didn’t want any of them to see my fall apart.

— Chapter Seventy-One —

ABOUT TO UNLEASH ALL THE HOUNDS OF HELL

— Darren —

We were all in the ballroom. The place was packed. There were people everywhere including the gallery upstairs. No one could have sat.

Every ranked member of Blakemore and its packs were here. So was all the warriors. Hundreds of them. Some were standing on the ledges of the windows to better see.

Eva was next to me, and was holding my hand tightly. The rumours had spread even faster than it ever did before, the ability to mindlink only added to the ease for gossiping. Only this one was dark and uttered in somber hushed voices.

When Eva heard, she fell apart, like I hadn't seen since Ghealach. The news had opened that wound wide-open, and I had rocked her shaking frame until she subsided.

Sebastian had briefed us on details about spirit wolves to a room as quiet as the grave. No one dare think what could be happening to her right now.

He was doing the very same thing here, briefing us all on what has happened, why, what would happen next. Everyone knew Elaeya was special from the moment they laid eyes on her. Her gifts, and gaining mindlink, had only increased this. But I knew no one here had imagined the extent of it. And the consensus was not to persecute her like so many would have done in the past, but to get her back. She was Blakemore's Luna. She belonged here. They would fight for this. The Alpha didn't even need to order it.

Werewolves are generally very protective of their pack, but it was like something a lot deeper had been hurt here, and it would not be left alone.

Blakemore was about to unleash all the hounds of Hell.

Kaden moved to the dais after his father was done.

"I will not order anyone to fight, but I open this beyond the trained warriors," his voice was not only resonating in the room but also in my and everyone else's mind, just like Sebastian had done. This was sent to every member of Blakemore.

"Anyone capable of combat of eighteen or more will be accepted. Everyone participating will receive warriors pay and high risk bonuses. I also open up to external warriors, mercenaries, allies, all capable fighters. Today, Blakemore is raising the biggest army werewolves have ever seen. And I won't limit this to wolves, or shifters—any warriors, period."

He managed to have a calm that I knew I was absolutely incapable to have in such a situation. I would never have the strength.

“There will be a few main tasks at hand. One, make sure all the additional warriors knows what they must, and are ready. Two, warrior acquisition, there as been a release of a request on all the main forums and words have been sent to allies, there will need to be follow ups. Three, weapons. We empty our full inventory, and anything we can acquire in a timely manner, we will. No limitations. Four, tracking. We find her and fast. Five, finding who made the hit and track it to the source. I don’t just want a scapegoat, I want every single person involved directly or indirectly and I want their heads. Six, any other resources. Food, beds, anyone who can help, helps. Someone thought Blakemore is nothing to be afraid of. Today, we will show this whole planet that it was the worst mistake of their existence. We will get back our Luna, and they will all pay. They will pay for every life they took, they will pay for the sheer stupidity of the affront they gave us. They will pay for taking away our heart, and we won’t let them rip it apart.

Today is the first day of the greatest war. We will make their blood rain until nothing is left. They will be erased from history, until there is only ghost stories left. No one will ever dare to attack Blakemore again. No one will take our children away, our wives, husbands, sibling, parents, friends. This is our family, and no one will take it from us.”

It elicited fierce cheers that were tainted in the pain of what had happened.

Tomorrow, many will be buried.

I knew Ylva was between life and death in the hospital. There was still a lot at stake. We could be trying to save what was already nothing but body parts. But it didn’t mean we would stop. I knew intimately how Kaden felt, and I would have never stopped until I could hold her in my arms. I knew he would do the same.

I guessed this was the second war. The war of loss.

By the time we reach the third, there might be no earth left to scorch.

— Kaden —

I walked out of the ballroom still numb. I was running on autopilot. I was trying my best to control my emotions. It was probably not a good thing to start scaring my own people again. It would give me no result. I was all about results. It’s the only thing I was focussing on. I didn’t let my mind wonder about what was happening to Elaeya anymore. I couldn’t afford the weakness.

I stopped dead in my track.

In front of me was the woman that had warned Elaeya about me. Who said I could hurt her, destroy her. She looked at me with eyes that saw so much more, eyes so much like hers.

What do you say to your mother-in-law after you lost her daughter to the monsters.

No words came out. I just clenched my jaw as I looked at her. I didn't know what to do.

She walked to me and stopped one foot away.

She raised her hand and laid it gently on my skin.

I had half-expected her to hit me, but the kindness was even more painful.

Her eyes filled with water.

"Find her, please." It sounded like every syllable cost her.

"I will, or I will die trying," I promised. I couldn't stop my eyes to fill up. I hadn't let anyone see me break in more than twenty years, yet her begging was my undoing.

"Don't," she said. "She'll need you."

"I will be there."

"So will I," she said. "Before the battle begins, take me, I will call up all that I can. I will bless your army."

"Thank you."

She wiped the only tear that escaped my eye with her finger.

"Breath, you will have to face them."

I closed my eyes and did just like she said, it sounded just like something her daughter would say.

I took a few breaths until I was back to my impassive self.

She nodded at me and stepped aside to let me continue on my way.

— Chapter Seventy-Two —

HELL HAS DEVOURED ME

— Tamarak —

Seven hundred and fifty-nine days.

I haven't seen the sun or the moon since, but I feel it, every time the sun sets, every time it rises. I've counted. Seven hundred and fifty-nine days since they took me.

I've seen many come and go, I've seen a few die. I've trusted the wrong one, now I pay the price.

I thought I had grown desensitised to all those that would come through, all those that had their life shattered like mine.

The guards opened the cell. Mine was one of the biggest, sometimes I shared it, sometimes not. I had been alone in mine for nearly two days now, if you didn't count the corpse in the corner. It had been once a phoenix. They wanted his heart, the operating room had been busy with a particularly rowdy troll, so they did it here. They didn't bother to clean up.

When the smell will be too much for them in their quarter upstairs, they'll clean it.

Meanwhile, he was poor company.

One of them brought in my new cellmate.

She was beautiful, there we dirt stains on her dress. It was white, long, with an open back of netted macramé. It was simple but elegant, her skin was luminous despite the fact that she looked like she had taken a beating and was wearing a vinethorns collar.

And she was unconscious, limp as a ragged doll.

The jailer put her down delicately. I've never seen them have so much reverence. She must be expensive.

They dragged the chains and locked her limbs like they once did mine. Then they left, locking behind them, without a word. They rarely talk to us. They generally beat any who dares utter a word, it made us a bunch of silent shells, moving from time to time. Some died before their body broke, the spirit gone, the eyes dead, with nothing left in them. It tends to happen within the first month, if they ever last this long.

It always depended on where the money was.

The light dimmed as they departed, leaving a single bulb near the door where I couldn't see it. The rest of the underground bathed in darkness.

In front of my cell, the damn naga kept looking in my direction, her double-ringed yellow eyes barely ever blinking. That thing creeps me out. There were a few cages in the corner, some empty, some not.

The cells were not as crowded as they've been last month, but they didn't even bother with moving those in the cages to proper cells.

One was a tiny girl, she had been begging for her parents for weeks in Korean. I knew they'd been taken apart, she would not see them again. She understood that after a while, and stopped talking altogether. She slept most of the time now, eating on the ground like a vulgar animal whenever they bothered feeding us. The rest of the time she would stare at nothing in silence.

A few cages back, though, was another who was struggling more. A tall man, human, so he must be some sort of practitioner for them to care to take him. He had skin midnight coloured, and the tiny cage, that was a little tight for the girl, put him in a permanently contorted position, unable to sit up or lay back properly.

I'd heard him sing a few times, in the early days. It sounded like Cajun creole. But they beat him enough time for him to stop. At first he would stubbornly sing again, sometimes even in their faces. But like any other, there came a time when his spirit broke and he lost the will to sing.

I was dreading the awakening of my cellmate. They always cried and pleaded when they woke up.

I hate the tears, especially of women and children.

It hurts something deep inside, something I thought already dead, that stir one last time to hurt me once again.

It's better when they kill them before they have time to wake up.

It's easier this way.

They don't have time to suffer too long, to know what's coming, to feel it. It's just over.

I've wished for things to be over for so long.

At first, I kept attempting to escape. I've tried so many things, but no matter how far it went, it never worked all the way through. Then I began to wish on a rescue, or someone to come and kick their asses. Maybe they made enough enemies that eventually one would come to wipe them all off. Then I realised it was not happening, and my thoughts turned to death. I tried what I could in my limited position. They would never let me. In the end I just retreated inside my head. I tried to entertain me, calculate, remember all sorts of things, make sure my mind would not fall apart. But I stopped bothering with time. They's only so long someone can last through Hell.

Hell has devoured me a long time ago. There is nothing much left other than what stirs up every time a new one comes in. It will return to its slumber soon enough.

I heard the wheels of the metal carts before they opened the door.

I knew what that meant.

My withered muscles spasmed in gruesome anticipation.

I sick part of me wished for them to come for another, any other.

They wheeled the cart to my cell and unlocked it.

Please let it be for the girl, I wished.

But they looked at me.

One of them rolled the gears linked to my chains, locking me in position against the wall with my arms and legs spread wide.

The naga kept looking at me, unblinking.

They took the knives and pincers and went at it.

I tried not to scream.

I didn't want to give them the satisfaction. But there is only so much a man can endure.

I screamed in the end as they peeled the skin of my stomach and put the long strips in liquid filled jars.

When they were satisfied of the amount gathered, they released the locks on the chains holding me and I fell to the grimy ground with a thud.

My throat was raw, my corpse exhausted, I just stared at nothing in particular as they rolled the cart away and out, locking the cell behind them and the door of the room a little later.

I saw two pink orbs looking at me.

She was awake.

Probably shaken up by the screams. Yet she hadn't moved, I supposed it was the best way not to attract attention to oneself, but most did not manage this. They would scream and cower in a corner. Or crawl to our jailer begging for mercy. Yet she played dead.

He eyes stayed on mine, I felt a pull, stronger than anything I've felt in a long time. A pull to bring my mind back into my skull from whatever dark cave it had been hidden in.

I said nothing.

What is there to say?

She said nothing either.

Once the silence was complete for a few minutes and the men clearly gone, she looked at her left hand. There was a small silvery band on her ring finger. She twisted it around revealing a massive opal that had been hidden inside her palm.

I'm pretty sure if they had noticed such a jewel, they would have taken it. There was one silvery ringlet on either of her writs with a plain white crystal in the inner wrist. Those were probably not worth much though, which was probably why they didn't bother.

She examined her chains, then clawed at the collar. It covered nearly the whole length of her neck.

We heard them coming back. She twisted the ring again to hide the stone, and returned her arms in the exact position she had been in, and closed her eyes.

I guess this one has good survival instinct. Generally no one gets this good without a bit of training. But it might not last long. They'll get to her, like they got to everyone else, like they got to me.

They returned to our cell.

"Is she awake?" asked one to the other.

He walked to her and gave her a light kick on the head. She didn't stir.

"Doesn't seem like it."

"Maybe we should make a move before she decides to starve herself of something stupid like that," said the man in the back.

"What you want to use?" asked the one standing next to her head.

"Kyle said he got himself a rawhead and bloody bones."

"You think those things can breed?"

"Not a clue," he shrugged. "Maybe we can try it."

"We'll have to talk to Omar first."

"Right," he said and moved aside to let his partner out of the cell. "Once the drugs clear, we can start on the blood."

— Kaden —

I was looking at the content of the vault.

Father came to stand beside me.

"Oh," said Alik that was following in tow.

“You’re thinking of using them?” asked my father.

“I’ve all of this, right here,” I said. “What if I need them to succeed?”

He nodded. “We were supposed to just hold on to them, not used them. That would change things,” my father said.

“I know,” I said. “But could I risk not using them either?”

“Quite the conundrum?” said Alik. “That’s why power is dangerous to begin with. The moment shit happens, it’s really tempting to use it.”

“Would it be wrong?” I asked.

“In the end we are nothing but men. It’s not up to us to decide what is wrong and what is right. We can only guess,” he said. “Sometimes we get it right, sometimes we get it wrong. I’m not even sure we’ll ever know. Every time period seems to have a different definition. Different cultures, different places, it’s always different. That’s the thing with morals, we can only clumsily attempt to get it, but it’s only when we truly fail that we realise the fuckup.”

I looked at all the artifacts that were in my possessions. Some I knew held real power. None enough to topple empires, but together, enough to make them worry.

“Is it different from buying human weapons, from using our claw?”

“Who knows? Even if it was right, it doesn’t mean it won’t have bad consequences. It brings us back to intent versus action. We can say all we want that it’s the intentions that counts, but if the actions lead to more death, I don’t think many people will really consider the intention anymore. Which means you have to chuck your emotions by the window and start to calculate. How many lives on one side, how many on the other? That’s why power tends to corrupt, there is never a perfect solution and one day you have to sacrifice pieces. That’s how it gets to you in the end,” he said.

My father looked ahead in silence.

“I’m not strong on sacrificing pieces,” I said.

“Me neither,” said the wizard.

“I guess we’ll have to look at option three then,” said my father.

“I guess we have,” said Alik as we stare a bit longer.

— Chapter Seventy-Three —

THIS WAS MONSTER BUSINESS

— Kaden —

We were on the clearing where I married Elaeya.

There were no fairy lights, no flowers, no decorations. All the trees were bare except for the evergreens. There were a few early snowflakes falling around us. Pyres had been erected before me. Araeya was singing one of the most mournful songs I ever heard, it shattered everyone's heart.

Families were carrying shroud wrapped bodies to the pyres, one after the other.

"Anders Johanson, thirty-nine," said Jayson beside me, reading from a few sheets of papers in his hands. His throat was tight and he had difficulty talking. I just stared at the bodies of some of my best men being laid to rest.

"Dick Dodson, forty-five, Hugo Smith, twenty-eight, Finn Hansen, nineteen," he said. "Marika Da Silva, thirty," he continued as more bodies were brought. "Kayla Da Silva, five, Thomas Da Silva, two, Mitchell Da Silva twenty-nine."

An entire family.

"Maria Rossi, seven," he continued. "Patricia Rossi, twenty-four, Mathias Müller, five, Mika Müller, five, Mia Müller," he paused. "Eight months," he choked. He took a long inspiration to steady his voice. I watch as they brought a tiny little bundle to place in on one of the gigantic piles of wood. The disparity in size, ridiculous and horrendous at the same time.

I barely listened as Jayson drone on more names.

"Peter Müller, forty, Abella Novak, twenty-one, Lola Novak, one, Ingrid Ivanov, thirty, Emmet Murphy, six, Samantha Murphy, thirty-two, Martin Kennedy, fifty-eight, Alice Williamson, one, Frank Williamson, seventy-three, Margaret Williamson, seventy-four, Eleanor Williamson, nineteen."

We paused for an instant, looking as the last bodies were placed.

"We found one more body," he told me in a dead voice.

"Who?" I asked, equally numb.

"Patricia Rossi was three months pregnant."

I grinded my teeth. "They hurt my people Jay."

"I know," he said. "They will pay."

"They will."

One relative of every family came in with a torch. A few men set ablaze pyres for their entire family with tear-streaked faces.

Araeya continued to sing.

"How's Ylva?" I asked Jayson. "Is she—?"

"She's still alive," he said. "But it's not good. She's been shot twenty-seven times. It's a miracle she was still alive when we came. She lost a lot of blood. It's always harder to find matching blood donors for hybrids. The doctors are not very optimistic. She has shattered bones, damaged intestines, liver, there's a bullet lodged pretty close to her heart."

"They got to her heart?" I swallowed. I wanted to kill them a hundred times and piss on their graves.

"The worst is the one in her skull. They don't know yet if it connected with her brain. She's getting an MRI today. Even if she makes it, her cracked spine could mean paralysis, brain damage could mean vegetative state."

We watched the flame rise higher.

"The doctors said they'll do what they can, but to prepare for the worst."

"I loved this place. Good things happened here."

"It did."

"I'm not sure how I feel about it anymore."

There wasn't many placed on Blakemore who could contain the crowd that was here today. There was a constant music, like leaves dancing in the wind, only it was crying. Some quietly, a few loudly. There was so many that it was hard to distinguish one from the others.

"How are the preparations?" I asked him.

"We spent two point three million in armament already. We got a tank though, and a second-hand black-hawk, so that's not too bad for the price. Plus massive amount of amos, more guns, we got good deals on more AK47s and plenty of uzzis.

The reward as gotten a lot of attention from mercs all over. We're going to have to plan for their displacement here. We've gotten plenty of tips, and we have a team already checking everything up. Most is crap but we could get a golden nugget hidden somewhere in there."

The fire was warm against my skin, contrasting with the early winter wind.

"We've gotten massive response from the pack. I don't think we could have done better with conscription. We had to refuse people."

"Why?" I asked.

"Most because they were too young."

"Don't refuse them. They won't go on the battlefield but help with preparing weapons, or food, resources, anything we'll need."

"I suspected you'd ask for something like that, we're already compiling everything on this side that will have to be done."

I wanted to nod, but I didn't feel like it. I just started at the disappearing shapes behind the flames. I knew Jayson was doing the same next to me.

"All of your sisters have applied to do anything available for them to do. I suspect you wanted to keep them here?"

"Yeah, let's not create more juicy targets. There will be plenty do to here."

"An Anabella Peters has applied too, she's not from our pack—."

"Timothy Thomas's mate?"

"Yeah, Eva said to keep her away from anything risky, she's two months pregnant."

"Right. Let her help if she wants to, but nothing physically demanding."

He nodded. "I put Mishka in charge of the mercs and other outside warriors."

"Good."

"Boisclair is sending a hundred warriors."

One of the pyres crumbled as the wood was getting consumed.

"Forty-four other packs are sending warriors. Some just a couple, other a few dozens."

"Prepare for them," I told him.

"The brotherhood won't like this."

"Fuck the Brotherhood."

Araeya was still singing. I don't think she was singing only for the dead. A part of me knew she was calling to her daughter.

"Amen," said Jayson.

Something pinged.

Jayson pulled his phone out and looked at a few things, I let him.

"Okay," he said. "The tech team was working with Mishka on tracking some black market outposts. We have a list of five. That's a start."

“Any more likely than another?”

“Not that it seems,” he said.

“Call up the army, we’ll go one by one. I want all of them found out. We’re not stopping when we get her. We’re erasing them from existence. I want their heads on spikes. I want to send a message to anything that might get the idea that this is a respectable source of income.”

“Got it.”

“Have they tracked who put the hit yet?”

“Not yet.”

“When we find them, they’re the next we’ll eliminate.”

“Great. I love a good ethnic cleansing.”

He didn’t say it with pleasure, or mirth, but with an acknowledged darkness. He knew it would be bad, like I did, but we both knew it had to be done, and if we didn’t, this could possibly be the first of many. We had to kill it in the bud.

This was not vengeance, this was not justice, this was monster business.

Not matter how much our kin liked to pretend we were nothing but enhanced human, days like these reminded us that this was not our world, this was not what we were. In the face of monsters, you either fight them as equals, or die as victims.

I would fight, and I will win.

Today, we were preparing to march as the greater monsters. None will even hurt us again this way. We would make sure they knew.

This was not so much a battle, but a message. That’s how monsters communicate, in blood and fears. But I can speak the language, and I will.

I tried not to think of what was awaiting Elaeya if I didn’t found her in time.

— Chapter Seventy-Four —

HOW DANGEROUS MY HUSBAND CAN BE

— Kaden —

I was covered in blood from head to toe.

'What's the result?' I mindliked the head of all my teams.

We had decided to do synchronised attacks on all five location.

'Not here,' said Dimitri.

'Negative here too,' said Oskar.

'Nope,' said Jayson.

'I think there's something here,' said Jaxx.

'Any trace of her?' I asked. There had been none on my location.

'No, but I think she might have transitioned from here. Let my team finish their investigation, and I'll tell you as soon as possible.'

'Okay, but do as quick as possible, we might not have much time, and if she transitioned through multiple outposts it augments the risk of not finding her, or finding her too late,' I said. *'Any other find anything about any other outpost, I want this information, sooner or later I want them all gone.'*

I got various words of approval.

'You can question as much as you want within a relatively short time. But leave no survivor, and make sure to burn it. Get the heads in the trees of whatever other macabre sight inspire you. We will instil fear in any allies they may have. They'll have none left soon enough. Gotcha?'

Again they all approved.

That wasn't it. The only thing comforting in this was that we still had a trail, but it was not enough. We needed more. And now. Before it was too late.

— Tamarak —

Once we were left alone again, the white-haired girl reposition herself, sitting, flipped her ring, dug her finger between the collar and her skin and pulled with all her might.

I was a nice attempt.

"You would do better at finding a way to end yourself before they return. If they do what they said—. Rawheads are nasty things, you don't want those near you, death is probably better."

“Is that death than you want?” she asked me.

I rolled on my back, trying to alleviate the pain on my guts. It will probably take me a week the regenerate than much skin.

“If only I could,” I said.

She extended her right hand sharply in one smooth motion. A sword maybe two feet long swung out of nowhere and extended in her hand. In a spit second, she was armed. The blade was glistening and well cared for.

I looked at the crystals on her wrists. Were they where the blade has been stored. I saw no other option. Then I looked at the other crystal on her other wrist. Two swords.

This may change things. Something in me stirred, something dangerous.

She extended her arm in my direction, the tip of the blade near my neck.

“Do you want it now?” she asked.

I knew all prisoners looked at us, at least, those that could.

Our voices were low, there must be no one near or they would have come to beat us to silence.

“Go for death if you wish it, I could indulge you, but I’m leaving.”

“It’s a lot harder than you may think,” I told her.

“All the hounds of Hell are coming. I will leave before then.”

I looked at her curiously.

“Little vitteraï,” said the naga. “You have the sight?”

“I do,” she replied.

“You can’t have it with this collar,” the naga said.

“I don’t need the sight to know that my husband is coming.”

The naga scoffed and laid her back against the wall. “You won’t be this hopeful once they get to you.”

“I’m not hopeful, simply knowledgable of how dangerous my husband can be.”

I looked at her.

I wasn’t sure how I felt about all this. I didn’t want to get my hopes up. Nothing can crush you like crushed hopes. So I just turned my head to look at the ceiling.

“Do as you please,” I told her.

She put her sword on the ground. The barest sliver of light was reflected on the metal and appeared on the darkened ceiling. I looked at it. It was probably the most entertaining thing that has happened in ages.

The girl next to me put her fingers back in place and tried to pull at her collar once again, to no avail.

“It blocks your gifts,” I told her. “I doubt you have much strength to spill out with this on. Not many does.”

“Do you?” she asked.

“A little,” I admitted.

“How does it work.”

“It shuts you up. Anything that is part of you can’t reach its preternatural potential. Which is why the sword came out of its crystal prison, it’s not part of you, but everything else doesn’t work.”

She nodded, then frowned, looking at her ring.

She’ll forget about the husband in time, I thought.

She shifted her weight to be on her knees, bracing herself better. She inserted the fingers of both hands on either side of her collar and took a long inspiration. Then she pulled again.

I could hear her strain. The naga moved to the edge of her cell looking intently at the vitteraï. I turned my head to look too. There was a strange glint in that ring of hers.

Magic?

Does it have stored magic? Can she access it?

She continued to pull grunting in the effort, her eyes shut tight.

I saw the glint again, a little brighter now.

She was lacking muscles. Looking at her frame, most of her physical strength was probably preternatural. She had none right now.

I got up, my stomach screaming in pain.

I crawled to her and put my hands on either side with hers.

She stopped straining herself and looked at me curiously.

I nodded at her, she nodded back.

We took position.

She raised a finger stopping me, took the swords and cut her palm, then took the blood with her finger and smeared it on the opal, then put the sword back down.

We resumed our position.

“One,” I muttered. “Two, three.”

We applied all the strength we could. The stone shone this time, the white light reddened by the blood. I was about to slack off when I felt something budge. I redouble my efforts. The muscles on my core was a mass of pain, but I ignored it. I ignored the hunger, the pain, the exhaustion, the despair, everything. There was just this piece of junk that I wanted to destroy.

I felt my eyes heighten, probably switching to their slit-like state, the vein under the skin of my arms popping out. Nothing, not even thorncollars could completely contain my powers. It only had never been enough to take one off. But that little woman with her magic ring could have what I’d been missing all this time.

We both growled in effort, trying to cut the noise as much as possible, but it was completely impossible to shut it out entirely

I heard a click. For a second I thought they were coming back, it was too late. Until I realised it was the lock on her collar. I clicked a few more times until in broke.

Her effort stopped entirely.

I pulled the collar away as she fell into unconsciousness.

I pulled it far away for the slithering vines to slip out of her veins and neck entirely.

Little specks of blood were left on the openings.

The vined returned to their thorny self within a few seconds, shrinking.

I sat back against the wall, spent, looking at the lithe form on the dirty ground.

The naga looked at me with wide eyes.

I don’t think anything had managed to do this before. She had been here for longer than I. She had been into other facilities before too, but the look on her face told me she was thinking the same thing as me.

Then my mind started to calculate options.

I crawled back to the girl and laid my hand just above the sword, but stopped.

“What is it?” asked the naga.

“I think it’s protected,” I said feeling at the sword’s aura.

“Her blood,” she said. “Smear her blood on the blade so it would recognise you as her.”

I nodded.

I took her already injured hand and glided it on the blade.

I then approached my fingers slowly, really slowly, I expected something to happen, but when my finger connected, nothing did. But I could feel a buzzing under my skin. There was a protection. It would probably have hurt me if I hadn't used her blood.

I picked up the sword and started to scrape at the inner side of the collar.

The naga nodded approvingly.

We both knew there was probably not enough time left for us, we needed to buy time. If they knew she was not collared anymore, we would be on a timer. One that would probably be to our disadvantage. Especially as our only un-collared being was unconscious at the moment.

—Chapter Seventy-Five —

FIGHTING BACK

— Kaden —

'Hey boss,' said Mishka through the mindlink.

Everything was packed and we were ready to move. Jean-Philippe had sent us his plane, along with mine, and the helicopters, and all the cars, we had managed to move everyone pretty efficiently.

'Tell me something good,' I asked him.

'Well, it's pretty bad, but it's information we want,' he said. *'We tracked the hit, it came from the Brotherhood,'*

I thought a string of insults that Mishka got through the open connection between us.

'It didn't come from official channels though, so we can't assume everyone there is on board,' he said.

'It's still betrayal.'

'Yeah, and learning who it comes from now could have made us go after the whole lot of them. Which could be convenient if someone wants the Brotherhood out of the way.'

'You think they're being set-up?'

'I'm saying I'm unsure and I don't like acting on uncertainties.'

'Don't worry. I won't rush this. My priority is Ela, I'll focus on the fuckers when I have her back home.'

'Gotcha.'

'You got the techies still with you?'

'Yeah, but I'm nearly done showing them around the channels. They'll be able to continue on their own so I can go back to kicking ass. I want to kill something.'

'Tell them to keep digging as deep as they can, I want the names, the allies, their fucking underwear size, I want everything. I'm not going to be someone's fucking pawn. I don't just want the figurehead either. I want them all.'

'Got it, loud and clear.'

I cut the communication.

I tried Elaeya again, as I did every hour or so.

Nothing.

I connected to Jaxx.

'Tell, me you have something?'

'No—, wait.' I lost communication for a few seconds.

I tried to be patient and not tap my foot annoyingly.

I could hear the tap, tap, tap, of my soles on the gravel.

'We got something,' he said. *'A location, that's where she's been sent. If we're lucky, she's still there.'*

'Brief me,' I said. Then I felt my heart squeeze hard and for an instant I thought I was having a heart attack.

Sam was nearby. He saw this happen to me before, and dragged me out of the way before someone could see.

I saw his eyes gloss over for a brief instant, probably linking someone.

I felt my breath coming back slowly.

'Boss,' came Jaxx's voice in my head. *'I think I lost you there, you back?'*

'Yeah, give me a minute then you can tell me,' I told him.

"What's happened," asked Alik as he rushed towards us.

"Was it another heart attack?" asked Sam.

"Fuck," said Alik.

"Is it the separation?" asked Sam.

I was taking a few slow breaths to get everything back in order.

"Wait, that doesn't work," said Alik. We both looked at him. "That has healed," he explained. "It would take a long time to get you back there health-wise."

"But what about what I did to my soul for the ring? That has not completely healed, right?" I said.

"Wait, what?" said Sam.

"Give me a sec," said Alik.

He put his hand over my heart, not unlike Elaeya has done before, but he started chanting a string of words in a low muted voice.

It took him a while, his eyes closed, until a slow smile spread on his face and he looked up at me, taking his hand away.

"It's the ring," he said. "She just used it. The fact that you haven't healed is why it was so painful. If you'd been fully healed, it would have bothered you at best."

"Which means," I continued his train of thoughts. "She's alive, and fighting back."

"Something like that," he confirmed.

I raised a finger at the men to shut them up before this conversation continued and reconnected to Jaxx.

'Give me all you got,' I told him.

— Tamarak —

"What's been going on here?" said one of the jailers.

I had managed to put the collar back on the girl, now rendered useless, the lock damaged. If she moved around too much, it might just fall off, but she was still unconscious so I couldn't warn her about it.

I had managed to hide her opal inside the palm of her hand again, while her sword was behind my back pressed against the wall.

The naga had returned to her original position as if nothing had happened.

The man came before me and started to kick me in the face and gut.

I used my arms and hands to block as much as I could, but I didn't move less I'd reveal the sword.

It was bad.

My stomach was already killing me, all I could do was take the hit.

I dared a glimpse at the monster, as I saw the girl rose up silently, ten flick her left wrist, releasing the other sword in silence. I tried to keep my eyes on him, so he would not notice what was happening behind him.

— Elaeya —

I woke to pain.

For a moment, I was afraid of what had been happening. I could hear men panting.

As I came back to my senses, I realized most of the pain came from my neck. My side had been lying on a hard surface for too long with pebbles and I don't want to know what, biting in my skin. My hand was throbbing too.

I could hear the hits and a few whimpers of pain.

I opened my eyes. He was being beaten.

I could feel the collar back on my skin but I could not feel the thorns digging in.

I moved as silently as I could. Took my sword out, the other nowhere to be found, and I slashed at the man's neck.

My aim had been bad, my strength lesser than anything I was used to, but the blade bit easily into the man's neck, stopping as it half-severed the spine, and he fell with a strange gurgle.

"What's that?" said another who came to us.

I had no chains long enough to reach the bars. If he had any long-range weapon, like a gun, I was done for.

I switched the blade to my right, pulled my hand above my shoulder, and the second that the second jailer peeked around the corner in front of our cell, I threw the sword like a javelin. I was afraid to hit the bars, but it went in between, digging right in his neck, stopping him from crying for help.

He struggled a little and fell backwards.

The cell in front of us was not as deep and the woman in there could reach the bars, only barely.

She moved swiftly, got her hands on him and snapped his neck, careful not to touch the sword.

Clever, if she had, she would have been hit by a bolt of lightning.

The man beside me tried to move around and grab something behind him, but his arms and fingers were swollen like sausages and he struggled.

My sword fell from its hidden place, and I nodded my thanks.

I bend down and grabbed the assailant by the foot, dragging him closer. I looked into his pocket and everywhere until I found keys. I then took my shackles off. I went to my cellmate and took his off too, then collected my blood-soaked sword, looking at it curiously.

I tried to take the collar off again, but I struggle, he tried to help me but his fingers were clumsy. We did manage though and I dropped it on the ground in disgust.

I took the key to the cell and opened it.

The woman was looking expectantly at me, I obliged her and opened her cell.

"Do they have the keys of the collars around here?" I whispered after I unchained her.

"No," she said.

I took my blood-stained sword and gave it back to the man, as I was sure he had done this to be able to wield it.

He took it and inclined his head to me.

“What is your name?” I asked.

“Tamarak,” he replied.

I reopened the wound on my hand and applied blood on the second blade. They both looked at me curiously.

“What is your name?” I asked the woman.

“Pavarti,” she said.

I tended the sword to her after I smeared it, handle first. She inclined her head and took it.

I went to the other cells one by one.

“We should leave now,” Pavarti whispered.

“I’m taking us all out,” I replied.

She didn’t argue any further.

Some cells were empty, some had bodies. I went in to a man lying on the ground.

“He is dead,” Pavarti said.

“He still breaths,” I replied.

“Not for long,” said Tamarak. “Can’t you smell it?”

I could, but I couldn’t leave him this way.

Tamarak came and pointed the sword at the man neck. “Mercy,” he said.

The man looked briefly at him, understanding. He closed his eyes and extended his neck only an inch, probably all that he could muster with what little strength he had left.

I turned my head around as I heard the blade sink into the flesh.

Tamarak killed another one who had no legs or arms left and was pale as a ghost having lost too much blood, gangrene evident at the wound and the putrid smell unmistakable.

One man in a cage was released. He had been there for so long, he could hardly walk.

There was a little girl in another, alive but weak.

I found an old wheelchair somewhere and but the man in it, with the girl in his arm. He nodded in understanding at what I asked of him, and wrapped his weakened arms around the girl. I signed at Pavarti to wheel them.

She gave me the sword, I shook my head.

“I’ll manage,” I muttered. “Protect them.”

She nodded.

I noticed a crystal on one of the wooded shelves near a small desk clearly for the jailers to use. I threw it on the ground, and took a mass from behind the desk against the wall. I swung it over my head and smashed it on the crystal.

They were blocking me. I had to find them all, so I could talk to Kaden.

The metal resonated in the stone floor as it hit. The shards flying in all directions.

They would hear this for sure. The others would come, but they would have come anyways.

— Chapter Seventy-Six —

THE HEAVY ARTILLERY

— Kaden —

"I found it," said Jean-Philippe on the other side of the line.

The info we had found on Elaeya's position had been partial, but Jean-Philippe called on an old contact of his father.

"Text the info," I told him.

"Already did."

"Thanks." I hung up, then mindlinked it to the pilot and team.

"On our way, boss," said Georges as he came in my cabin. "We'll land soon. Should be there in a few hours at best."

"Thanks."

He nodded and left.

'How are things at home?' I asked Darren through the link.

'Like clockwork,' he said.

'I'm heading to location. You got the message about the Brotherhood?'

'Yes, we're looking at it from our side too. We have the medics on standby and more rations ready to send.'

'The moment I land I'll send back the plane, send what you can just in case. We never know how things will go.'

'Gotcha,' he said. *'Any casualty?'*

'Wounded, no dead from us. Boisclair's plane is on the ways with the wounded.'

'You want me to send everything through Boisclair's plane instead?'

'No, it's bigger than mine, and has a cargo haul.'

'You want the heavy artillery?'

'Yes. You send both planes back with the reserve.'

'Okay. Bring her back.'

'I will.'

— Tamarak —

She swung the mass above her shoulder and looked at the door, waiting patiently.

I was about to ask 'what the hell', but the naga stopped me. She looked at her intently. Was it this sight thing?

She shouldn't have destroyed that thing. They heard it for sure.

We heard someone fiddle with the lock. She put herself on the side of the door, clearing the space before it. A man came in and she swung with everything she had, her eyes darkening to a deep red-like shade. The mass hit him in the skull, crushing it to an unrecognizable mass of gore.

She didn't bother to swing back up the heavy tool and let it fall. She raised her right hand instead, fingers spread wide aimed at the second man, and before he could pull his gun, she muttered a word and his head exploded in a blood-like rain, splattering on the walls, ceiling, and all the way to us.

We heard someone let out a cry of surprise and he ran.

She held her left hand to us, stopping us from moving, listening. After a few seconds, she signed for us to follow her and she stepped out.

She guided us through a few corridors, until we reached a room without any exit.

"We took a wrong turn," I said.

"No, there are too many, we won't make it, we need more strength, or we won't escape," she said.

"Sight?" asked Pavarti.

She titled her head. "Hard to say, the crystals are blocking me, but it's a little clearer here." She looked around. "We need to get the collar off."

"That would be nice," I said. "Can you do it again?"

"I don't know," she said. "I think I managed to cover our tracks, they won't look here first, it should give us a few hours."

"Won't it give them more time to gather their forces?" asked Pavarti.

"Yes," she admitted. "But it will give us time to recover."

Pavarti looked at us. "Not enough," she said. "Little healing so to face more of them. Sound unwise."

"All I know is that now is death."

"Later?" I asked her.

“I don’t know,” she admitted.

The mood darkened instantly.

“Regardless, it’s better than the cell. Here I could die on my feet,” I said.

We found food with which we stuffed our face, and water too. We had to be careful not to eat too much as eating large quantities after starvation can kill you faster than the starvation itself.

We barricaded the door, and eventually crashed for a few hours of sleep. We were all exhausted and could barely go on. Pavarti offered to take the first round of watch, and no one argued.

We were awakened by loud bangs. We signed at one another not to make a sound.

“Since when is this door locked?” asked a man from the corridor.

“I don’t know, I don’t think there’s anything there,” said another.

“We should check regardless.”

“Go get the key. I think Omar has it.”

“Right, man, this is a pain. That’s why we shouldn’t lock those.”

We heard steps going away.

The vitteraï got up quietly and rummaged everywhere. She found a few tools, and signed for me to come with her. She pointed at the lock on Pavarti’s collar and gave me the tools. She then placed her hands on the collar.

It was a little easier than with hers, and it finally broke open.

Pavarti slumped on the ground and didn’t move for a few minutes, but she didn’t lose consciousness.

We went to the man, he pointed at the child. She hadn’t been talking, and I was starting to worry she might not survive it.

We repeated the process, carefully not to hurt her.

It took us a little longer, but it worked. She lost consciousness instantly and we placed her carefully on the ground.

The human put himself down right away, expecting to lose consciousness too, which was not stupid.

We did it again, only this time, she struggled even more.

It broke free and his eyes closed.

She turned to Pavarti who got up to me. She took the tools from me and positioned herself like I had done. The girl tried again, and failed. Then she did it once more. The lock creaked but

didn't break. She gathered her wits, took a long slow breath, then tried again. It broke and everything went black.

— Elaeya —

I was feeling the strain.

I would not be able to use the ring again, not for a while, but at least everyone was free of the collars.

I sat down exhausted.

Tamarak regained consciousness nearly instantly.

The man and girl were still out.

Out position was not good. We needed to get out of here before they returned.

I signed at them both to help me move them out.

Once we took off our barricade, I nervously opened the door, only a crack. I could not hear anything on the other side, but I was worried they may have been as silent as us.

I made sure to use a spell to hide our track as we moved out.

We heard them coming before they came, and we managed to rush inside another room and close the door before they followed us.

They went pass our door, where we had been minutes before.

We heard them cry out when they figured we had been there.

I turned around.

The room we were in was dark, but I could smell flammables.

— Chapter Seventy-Seven —

SO CLOSE, YET SO FAR

— Kaden —

“We got words they know we’re coming and have called up the cavalry,” told me Jaxx.

“Huh,” said Mishka next to me. “I thought they would have run instead of forting up.”

“Yeah, I thought that too. Maybe something is wrong. Maybe they have a better defence here. I don’t know. Regardless, we should be careful,” said Jaxx.

I nodded. “Everyone ready?”

“Yep,” said Jaxx.

I had felt five more pang in my chest. Why? Was she under attack? The thought alone drove me crazy.

“Okay,” I said. “We charge in five.”

I walked out of base camp and moved to the front.

I waited for people to gather. There was no need for a pretty speech, none of us were here for this.

“BLOOD!” was all that I screamed.

“BLOOD!” They all screamed back in unison.

Araeya walked to me and began the ceremony she had promised.

She hadn’t been there for the other raids, so I supposed that somehow deep down, she had known it had not been the place. Which only reinforced the idea that this was where she was.

Inside, it was like a part of me knew and wanted nothing but to go to that freaking fort and drag her out of there. She was there. I was sure.

So close, yet so far.

Araeya sang a song with her drum, then killed a chicken, poured the blood in a bowl and mixed in a few other things too.

She was wearing her buckskin dress and antlers again.

She made quite an impression, but the men were starting to really trust what she and Elaeya could do. Since the Luna ceremony, it was hard to find anyone unimpressed by the mindlink. There was also the visions.

She came to me and painted my face in blood, murmuring strange words. Then smacked me in the chest.

It was like being hit by a car, only there was no physical impact. Something stirred inside, I don't know what it was, but it was primal.

She then dipped her fingers into the bowl and would splash the men by flicking her hand at them while walking through the line, chanting.

I let her do her thing, but I was awfully fidgety, and I noticed, so were the men splattered in blood.

It was like a hunger was building inside me, one that felt like it could never be sated.

When she was done, she turned to me from the back of the crowd and nodded.

"FIGHT!" I screamed. And everyone rushed by me impatient with their own battle cry.

I had thought we should not announce ourselves too much at first, but right now, I just wanted to join them.

I kept my desires in check as much as I could as I walked amongst the men running on either side of me.

I took the biggest, longest breath I've ever taken, and released the mother of all roars. The tree further away shook, birds flew out, the closest men to me stumbled and a few fell, and had to rush back up as to not be trampled to death. I was sure anyone could have heard it from a kilometer or two away.

I felt something at my feet and I looked down as I continued forwards. The black mist was coming out again.

Everyone running by me gave me a wide berth now, but no one was undeterred. Plenty of them had already shifted, incapable to hold back their wolf.

I let my claws elongate and I smiled as I began to smell the blood ahead of us.

The first shot resounded like thunder, quickly followed by howls of hunger. Everyone wanted blood.

The wizard was walking not far from me, clearly not motivated enough to run. But then again, he had human stamina.

Bullets came our way, he rose his left hand, muttered a word, and a large transparent dome rose above us. When the bullet hit it, symbols of power shined in yellow light, upon which they rebounded.

He few people gave the man an impressed look before they bounded forward.

He then dropped the shield and sent a massive ball of fire where the shots had come from, as he raised his staff with a cry. The thing was the size of an economy-class car and went hurling through the hair in a straight line to hit the stone wall in an earth-shattering concussion.

I took my sword out and let out another roar.

A massive mass of black passed me by, a ginormous black werewolf with red eyes half crawled with his hind leg giving a few pushes and the front ones dragging its carcass, yet the handicap didn't stop him from plowing through the crowd like an enraged bulldozer. One of the attackers face twisted in front of the incoming werewolf, showing its ghoulish self, yet the wolf crushed it casually with one of his front paws, the bones crackling audibly under the weight.

The mist around me spread further, moving around my men, and then caught something invisible. I felt it as if the mist was part of me. I turned around and saw the mass move through the mist leaving a circle of nothing. I was about to swing my sword, but decided against it. I felt like I had a new muscle that I could flex, and flexing it I did.

A man appeared where there had been nothing a second ago. The mist sank into his mouth and he contorted before he fell on the ground, his skin turning grey. He smelt of death. He didn't have long. I didn't even bother, and continued to move forward.

I heard in the background behind us Araeya's staff hitting the ground rhythmically, with the loose bones at the top clacking like a macabre maracas. She sang a guttural throat song with sharp consonant and I saw a few corpses stir. I would have normally freak out, but with my present blood-high, I didn't give a rat's ass.

I watched the thing crawl up and grab one of its former compatriots to drag it down and tear it apart in ghoulish horror. The men screaming for just a few seconds. Then they both rose up to attack another one of their former allies.

I should make a note to myself never to piss off that woman. That is some freaky shit right there.

I took my handgun and shot a few from a distance but it was unsatisfactory. I wanted to taste their blood. I wanted to feel their gut in my mouth, I wanted it close and personal. I wanted to see the life run out of their eyes. I wanted them to know who killed them.

I was not a man. Today, I was a beast.

I heard someone scream, "YEEHAW!" from the top of the tank that was slowly moving forward.

It got a few cheers as it passed by, another jumped on top and screamed, "YEEPEEKAYAY MOTHERFUCKERS!"

I wasn't the only one on blood frenzied high, and I guessed what Araeya did, triggered it.

Everyone fought like they had nothing to lose, like it was the greatest thing in the world, without restraint.

There was a massive 'BOOM' as the tank released its first shell.

If the numbers were right, there would be a few hundred people in there. I just hoped no one would blow my wife up with their enthusiasm. I sent everyone a quick mindlink to make sure it would not be the case.

I bend down, then propelled myself upwards, over my people, right into the fray.

— Chapter Seventy-Eight —

UNDER ALL THE BLOOD

— Elaeya —

We grabbed the fuel. I opened the door and splashed it in the direction the men went. I knew there was no other way out. Tamarak came in after me and splashed another can. His hands were nearly back to their normal size now.

He put his hand on my shoulder, moving me aside gently, and I complied.

A few of them heard us and came rushing out.

I saw two go for their gun, but Tamarak blew out air from his month that turned into a long steam of fire, igniting the fuel automatically.

He rushed aside and back inside the room as they fired their weapons.

I took a few inspirations and concentrated, then rushed out with my left hand forward, conjuring a shield.

“Get them out,” I told them.

They did and I walked slowly backwards as bullets occasionally hit my shield, the fire still raging, until we were out of sight.

More people came from the other side, and Tamarak blew another jet of fire in their direction.

I didn’t like that. I was not fireproof and burning so much air in a tight corridor will make it hard to breathe soon. There was a small spiral staircase nearby. I went down first, then Tamarak who grabbed the lower part of the wheelchair, and Pavarti the upper back part, raising it above the ground. We went down as fast as he could, and I felt the fatigue grow as I went down.

The drugs, the collar, I had barely rested from the battle at Blakemore, and I was using too much magic too quickly. I would not be able to fight for very long.

We came down in a small corridor that led to a large room.

We could hear the men coming after us from above the stairs so we ran to the room and blocked the door. Others were coming. There were a lot more of them than I expected.

Pavarti placed the chair back against a solid stone wall, and dragged a heavy wooden desk in front of them as if it was nothing. Giving the man and child what little protection she could. Then she rushed out, her feet light on the stone floor, her long jet-black hair flowing behind and her beauty striking, even despite the grime and mistreatment she had received.

Tamarak, realising was she was doing, rushing in behind her.

As the first man ran in. Pavarti jumped gracefully and stroke him with the sword in one easy stroke. Tamarak had less grace but far more power behind his swing despite his weakened state. Both of them attacking swiftly as the men came in. The injuries on Tamarak's stomach clearly hindering his movement.

I didn't move. I wasn't sure I could.

There was a deafening 'BOOM' that shook the entire building. It blew a hole somewhere in the carapace of the fort and we heard the sound of battles further away. Gunshots now resounded through the hall.

Another group came it from another door and I focused everything that I could on them.

I released small burst spells aiming at critical points. Heads exploded, some guts too, two hearts burst out of their chests in eruptions of gore. The explosions violent enough to reach the ceiling twelves feet above.

I had to alternate between shield and attacks.

I moved forward so that I would stand between them and my allies. Stopping the bullets dead.

I attacked on both sides, giving release to Pavarti and Tamarak as they got swarmed.

My vision was getting blurry. I had over exerted myself already, and was digging deep to gather any energy I could muster.

There were series of earthquakes triggered by the artillery evidently being used against the fort.

I felt a shift in the air. I was sure that one of those attacks had taken a crystal out, and though I still felt their pressure on my senses, there was a release as if I could breathe better.

Behind be, heavy booms came at regular intervals as more people tried to get in from the same door we did, the barricade not sustainable for long.

I closed my eyes for a second.

'Kade?' I asked through the link.

'Ela,' he replied in shock. It had worked, it was enough for me to call out. *'Where—.'*

I did not let him finish.

'Quick, I am nearly out of time,' I said then cut the communication and focused on the attacks as I moved swiftly, so that a bullet missed me. It had been a hair away from my skin.

I felt Kaden try to communicate again, but I could not allow myself the distraction any further.

"DOWN!" I screamed.

I hoped with all my heart that Pavarti and Tamarak would get out of the way in time as I put my hands on either side and let out a massive burst of energy. Digging into the ground and air. Any lingering energy that I could tap into as I was not so restrained anymore.

I felt the warm droplet hit my skin from both sides. There was so much blood on the ceiling that it was dripping down. There were bodies parts everyone falling in fleshy 'plops' around me.

I look around, dizzy, I wasn't sure I could move my body without falling down. My arm loose on either side of me.

Gore splattered Pavarti rose from under a body. Tamarak, got up, in equal style.

A few men had had the same instinct and had gone down. I did not have the strength to fight them.

Tamarak moved slowly and beheaded one. Pavarti rushed around in a deadly dance and finished the others.

There was a loud bang on the metal door in front of us.

"Open it," I said.

They both looked at me like I was mad.

It sounded bad, but I knew it was our only chance.

"Do it," I said.

Pavarti complied with the sword in hand. Tamarak just dropped on the floor with his back against the wall, unable to fight any longer, but he still held the sword.

Light burst out of the doors, and an army rushed to us.

I heard Pavarti squeal as she was overpowered.

But I also smelt wolves, a lot of wolves.

"STOP!" I screamed, and they did.

"Ela," said the most beautiful voice in the world.

"Take her, heal her, save her," I told him.

He did not have to order the other, I knew it was already done.

"And him," I said jutting my chin at Tamarak. "And the two behind the desk."

Men rushed forwards and grabbed Tamarak off the floor.

At this very moment, the men that I rushed after us from the staircase burst through the door, and an army of wolves fell on them.

They ripped them to pieces.

I saw a large silhouette walk towards me, and it smelt wonderful under all the blood. When his shadow covered me, I finally saw his face.

He was about to take me in his arms, but I shook my head.

He understood, I knew he would. I walked slowly, carefully towards the exit, he walked beside me, close enough to catch me if I fell, but he let me walk out on my own two feet.

It would not be a victim who couldn't walk out on my own, it would not be a weak woman. I would walk out of here as the warrior who repainted the stones in blood.

And everyone would know it.

I barely registered where we were going, too exhausted. I just followed him. My vision was failing me, but his presence, I could sense. I followed it. The brisk air sharp on my skin, but I was too tired to shiver.

I know people parted for us. We passed more bodies than I would have expected. They had swarmed the place, but it had not been enough to face the hounds of Hell.

A massive military Hummer was parked next to the door. The moment I slipped in, I felt myself go, and hands grabbed me and held me gently.

— Chapter Seventy-Nine —

THE ACCORD

— Kaden —

“What’s the report,” I asked Darren from a small room next to Elaeya hospital room.

“First, how is she?” he asked me.

“I was told it’s mostly exhaustion and nothing more, she’s being monitored, but she should be fine.”

He let out a long sighed of relief. “Eva will need to hear this. It has gotten her in dark places, this whole affair.”

“How is she?”

“She’ll be okay, but she’ll need a bit of time.”

I nodded.

“Okay, report,” he said. “Forty injured, nine serious, no death.”

I let out my own sigh of relief.

“The one that came with Elaeya were prisoners. The woman is a naga.”

I felt my eyebrows go up at that. Those are not frequent around here and nagis are pretty badass from what I heard.

“Named Pavarti. The man is a drake.”

My eyes widened even more. Those are nearly instinct and probably as rare as spirit wolves.

“Named Tamarak. The human is a witchdoctor named André. The girl is a gumiho, but we got no name yet as she doesn’t speak. They are all getting better though. But I would say they should all get a massive amount of therapy. What I’ve learned so far, it was not Cancun in there.”

I nodded. “Anything they need, you offer it. They can also stay as long as they want, but also make sure they know they can leave whenever they want, or they may think they’ve just been sent to another prison, only with nicer beds and doctors.”

“Right,” he said, punching a few things on his tablet. “We found a few more locations, we send the warriors?”

“Send them,” I said.

He nodded. “Rumours on the dark net is that a lot of outposts are being dismantled.”

I nodded.

“Jean-Philipped contacted us with names in the Brotherhood, which came from the same contact that helped us find Elaeya,” he told me.

“You know all the people involved?”

“We got a pretty good idea, but we have a few more to verify.”

“Good.”

“A delegation from Boisclair is on its way.”

“I expected as much,” I said. “How about the rest?”

“Everything is falling back into place, normal life should return in a week or two.”

“I’m not so sure,” I said.

“Why?”

“We can leave it rest, without getting back at those who started this.”

“The war of betrayal,” he said.

I nodded.

“The swamps,” I told him. “Acquire them.”

“Mmmh. I’m not sure their people will like it.”

“I don’t care. Pay them, relocate them, make deals with them, ally with them, whatever option they’re ready to go for, we will. This is not a weakness I will keep.”

“It’s pretty hard to attack through there.”

“Yet they did it regardless. It won’t happen again.”

He typed on his tablet. “I’ll see what we can do about that.”

“Do better than that.”

He nodded. “Okay, Boss.”

* * * * *

“You sure about this?” I asked Jean-Philippe.

“I am,” he said.

“There is no turning back from this.”

"I know, I talked with Jasmine, we decided this together."

I nodded and handed him the paper.

He signed it and slid it back to me. I signed it too. Brandon and Darren signed as witness.

"How are things going?"

"Three more attacks are underway at this very moment. If everything goes well, we would have gone through all the major black market outpost within the month," said Brandon. "If we stay vigilant, we should track the minor outposts within three to six months. After that we just have to stay sharp and nip everything in the bud and it sets up. There will be no black market again. At least nothing like there has been in the past. This time is over."

"I'm not sad to see it gone," Darren admitted.

"How is Elaeya?" asked Jean-Philippe

"Sleeping, she woke a bit, we talked, but it didn't last long. She's been transferred home."

"Good. I like her. I'm glad she's okay."

"So am I," I said.

"I can't imagine what you went through." He shook his head as Darren and Brandon grabbed everything and left. "If the Brotherhood did this to you, then anyone could be the next target."

"It wasn't the Brotherhood per se," I admitted. "But agent within the Brotherhood."

"I'm guessing they will receive a visit soon?"

"They will."

"Count me in." He extended his hand to me.

I shook it.

* * * * *

"Are you sure?" I asked Elaeya.

"Yes, I'm coming," she said.

"It could be dangerous."

"It will be, but a message as to come across and I will be there for it," she said firmly.

I didn't dare contradict her, but I was not fond of the idea of having her out of Blakemore just yet.

"We'll wait then," I said.

"Why?"

“Until all my men are back. I don’t march you out of here without the entire army.”

“That will get the message across alright.”

I smiled wolfishly.

We were in bed, her head was against my arm.

“Can I get your thought on a couple of things?” I asked her.

“Sure.”

I told her about what her mother did before the battle and how it affected me.

She nodded knowingly once I was done.

“You have heard of berserkers right?”

“The mad Viking warriors who fought without fears and from which the work berserk comes from?”

“More or less,” she said. “There are a few ways to make a berserker, one includes a potion including hallucinogenic and painkillers, but there are other ways. One is to summon the spirit of a predator, often bears or wolves, in a form of controlled possession. The spirits heighten stamina, pushes limits and the pain threshold too. Pain is there to limit us so not to hurt ourselves. Your nerve endings are there to stop you from tearing your muscles. Which is why berserkers don’t have a long life expectancy, but werewolves are different because of the regenerative abilities.

But the spirit reacts the your inner wolf, making the primal aspect like hunger that more prevalent and hard to control.”

“Your mother turned my army into a berserkers army?”

“Pretty much.”

I thought about it.

“How come she painted my face, but didn’t do as much to my men for similar result,” then I got it before she answered. “She exploited the link between Alpha and pack.”

“Yes, which is why it probably didn’t have the same effect to non-pack members present.”

“There’s something else,” I said, and I told her about the dark mist that appeared around me and what the wizard said about it.

“I’m not sure about that one and Alik might know more, but I think it’s, in part, a reaction to my magic, combined with how your own powers have grown, it’s like a congeal aura that you have some level of control over, but I’m not sure the extent of which you have, or all that it can do.”

“Like kill?”

“I think it most probably stole the life instead.”

That had my eyebrows go way up.

“We should study this some more,” she suggested.

“Have you gained some new abilities from me?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “I did have a lot for stamina, magically speaking, more than I’m used to, but I’m not sure if it comes from you or not. At least yet. I guess there may be a lot for us to learn still.”

“I guess.”

* * * * *

Mishka came to see me the next day.

“We need to talk,” he told me, closing the door of my office behind him.

“Sure,” I said.

“It’s about Ylva.”

“What is it?” I felt my heart squeeze upon itself.

“She’s not doing well.”

“I know.”

“She really blamed herself for what happened with the Other. She took that pretty hard,” he said. “I think this time, it’s worse.”

“What do you mean?”

“She’s a bodyguard and she takes this pretty seriously. She a warrior through and through. She was saved by the one she was hired to pretect, twice. And she failed to protect her both times.”

“The others didn’t do any better.”

“Maybe, but that’s not how she sees it. She sees it has her not being good enough. She seriously cares about Elaeya. I know it. I think she giving up. I think she decided to stop fighting. The doctors are not optimistic. I think you have to go and she her. Tell her it’s okay, tell her everything’s alright and you don’t blame her. Please.”

I have rarely seen this jackass so worried, which worried me even more.

The next day, Elaeya and I went to see Ylva.

We stayed for a while as she was unconscious.

When she finally opened her eyes and saw Elaeya, she fell apart.

I've known her long enough to know it's nothing she would have wanted anyone to see, so I let the women together for a while. When I came back later, she was a little better and I did her the curtesy not to mention what had happened. We talked a bit. More us than her, she was pretty weak.

I don't know if it helped. I hope so. I like her, it would break my heart to see her go, but her eyes were that of a broken woman.

When we left her room, Elaeya hugged me and we stayed this way for a while before we left.

* * * * *

The following week, we marched on the capital, with the entire army of both Blakemore and Boisclair in tow. The city stopped functioning for a few hours. All streets clogged. We had sent people ahead with the military vehicles to make sure we would not be grid-locked, but it did have for consequence, to lock everyone else.

My men pushed their way through the great hall, so that when we walked in, not one interrupted us. The few who saw this as assault and tried to stop us, we disarmed and neutralised. We killed none, and it was little mercy. There was a part of me, a very dark part of me, that would have loved to see the blood run on the pompous black marble floor of the Great Hall.

We had sent ahead a message so that we would be sure all of the Brothers—or as many as we could hope for—would be there.

When we entered the main hall, they we there in complete silence, looking at us with wide eyes.

My men fanned out around the room, with their weapons clearly visible, for better intimidation.

Elaeya was standing on my right, Jean-Philippe on my left.

"Someone," I said in a booming voice within the heavy silence. "Attacked my wife." I let the words resonate and sink in. "A Brother made a hit on her to have her taken into the fucking black market. If you're not up on your news lately, they're mostly gone. I will make sure none will sprout out again. It was not a lone wolf act. I want the head of those who did this. You have seventy hours to find them and take care of your own trash. If you don't, or if you spare any, I will return with my army, and I will erase the Brotherhood from history."

I extended my hand and Brandon gave me a rolled parchment.

"This is my signature under the Moonhunter's Accord," I said unrolling it, and I ripped it apart.

Elaeya extended her hand and flamed sprouted out and set the parchment ablaze.

Jean-Philippe extended his hand and one of his men gave him his own parchment.

“As sisterpack of Blakemore, Boisclair rescind its position under the Accord,” he said ripping it off. Then he extended the pieces to the flames until the paper caught fire. I dropped mine before it burnt my hands and Jean-Philippe dropped his on top.

“Seventy-two hours,” I said and turned around.

— Chapter Eighty —

THE BEGINNING

— Elaeya —

I woke in a familiar hospital room. Kaden was there. I tried to smile and tell him I was okay and to wipe those worries off his face, but the words caught it my throat. The place smelt clean and fresh, but there was this echo of filth, and blood, and gore that came back to me and refused to go way.

I closed my eyes for a moment, but realised my mistake instantly as all I could see and hear was the screams of Tamarak as he was being skinned alive, the gurgles of the man's throat I cut, the plop, plop of body part falling down, and the warmth of the gore hitting my skin.

I jerk uncontrollably, trying to wipe away the phantom filth off of me.

I knew it wasn't there, my brain knew, but it didn't want to believe.

Kaden sat on the bed and held me.

I wanted to show him how strong I was, how fierce I could be, how this had changed nothing, how we would go through this and continue our life together unimpeded, unafraid. But again, my mind didn't comply and my emotion burst out.

I hugged him for all that I was worth. I knew deep down that this was silly that I could do this, that this was the end of nothing. But there were things that I've held down for so long that I needed to release that I never gave away. And at this moment I knew it had to come out.

I've spent so long never letting myself be vulnerable, never weak, but as he took me in his arms and crushed me against his chest, I knew I could be vulnerable that I could survive it, that I would lose nothing for it.

I just opened the floodgates.

I quickly fell asleep again.

I woke a few times, until I was sent back home.

For a few days, there was this numbness inside. As if the everyday routine felt alien and odd. There was a disconnect that slowly faded with time. I knew it would.

I was glad to find that the wounds on my neck had healed completely and left no visible scars. Those on my belly were nearly completely gone too. I knew how it bothers Kaden to see them and how much he blamed himself.

It didn't say it outright, but it was there. He saw himself as responsible for everyone's safety in his pack, and any failure in this was a failure or his. I know he was haunted by the families who perished in the attack, so was I. There were nights when I still heard their screams of pain, and pleads. And I would wake up, and hug him until I felt back asleep.

"I won't stay," said André as I visited him.

He was doing a lot better and was doing some physical therapy to get all his limbs moving right again.

I nodded, I expected that some of them would not stay for long.

"I have a family, you see," he said.

I nodded again.

"I do have something for you though." He took out a silvery chain with a few little pieces dangling from it. "It's a gris-gris. I made it just for you. For protection. As a thank you, for saving me."

Pavarti was on another bed in that room. She was looking very intently at us. Tamarak, and the little girl shared the room next door.

"Give me your left ankle," he told me.

I raised my leg and complied.

He tied the little chain around it, I felt its quiet power instantly.

"Thank you, but I think my husband did a lot more than I," I told him.

He nodded. "I will have to find something for him then."

A few days later, Pavarti was gone. No one knew how she had managed to escape without anyone noticing, especially with the heightened security everywhere.

"Nagis, man," said Alik. "They're half-divine, you know. It's pretty hard to keep one prisoner to begin with."

Kaden nodded. "Well, she was not a prisoner here so—," he let the words tail out.

"I would have liked to say good by though," I said.

André came to us with a big wooded box in his hand and put it down at our feet.

We were in the pack house talking with Alik who had grown into a good friend and confidant.

"I'll be leaving today," said André. "The little lady told me you deserved your thanks," he told Kaden.

Kade gave me a knowing look but shook his head at André. "I got all that I need."

André smiled. “Where I’m from, it’s impolite to refuse a gift.”

“Do beg pardon,” Kaden said formally with a smirk. “Below me to refuse a gift of good intentions.”

André smiled wider. “This is for you,” he said pointing at the box.”

He took a small knife and extended it to Kaden handle first.

“Please, if you’d be kind enough to cut your hand,” He asked Kaden.

Kaden looked at the man confused. I gave him a nod.

I was curious to see what this was about, but I knew there was nothing wrong about it.

Kaden, at my assurance, took the blade and cut his left hand.

“Now, pour some of the blood in this box and repeat the words after me,” he said opening a slit on the top of the box.

Kaden quirked an eyebrow at him then looked at me.

I nodded again, he shrugged and complied.

Alik was watching the scene very intently.

André said a few words in creole that I did not understand and Kaden repeated them as best he could.

“So,” said Kaden a few seconds after they were done. “What is this about?”

“I heard they call you the Hellhound,” said André. “I’m a witchdoctor. The underworld is my prowling ground. I thought you might enjoy the real thing,” he said flipping the top of the box off completely.

Three balls of fur jumped out and rushed to us.

Kaden squealed instinctively and backed off, dragging me behind him.

“Stop,” he ordered instinctively. The hounds stopped and sat at his feet, tails wagging and their red glowing eyes on him expectantly.

“I know of this underworld god who has a three headed dog as a guardian, but those are pretty hard to come by, so I summoned you three hellhounds. You will find them incredibly loyal and protective.”

“Ah!,” said Alik. “That was what the blood was all about. Establishing ownership.”

André nodded at the wizard.

“How loyal are we talking?” Alik asked, looking at the pup clinically.

"Intensely so. They will grow to become quite big and will need massive amount of meat. Fresh or rotten, it matters very little to them, but they prefer blood over water, so get yourself well acquainted with butcher shops around. They will obey, but you don't always have to command them verbally. They are known to enjoy what their master enjoy," he inclined his head to me politely. "And to hate what their master hate. So a little word of advice here. Don't leave them unsupervised in a room with one of your enemies unless you're okay with crime scene clean-up crews."

Kaden nodded at him, his eyes fixed on the puppies.

It was an unexpected gift.

We received a box through special mail addressed to Kaden and I. Inside it we found two wooden boxes, one little box addressed to me and the biggest one to Kaden. Inside mine, I found a necklace. The package contained a note from Pavarti.

For your help and care, when the time comes, this will give you in turn the help you will need.

Inside the other box addressed to Kaden were two wide scimitars of intricate designs with a note.

You have killed enemies of mine and freed me asking for nothing in return. I know of no other gift but to give you tools to do more of this, and do so more efficiently, and send to the underworld those than must, while protecting, those that should be. You have my blessing. We shall meet again one day. Pavarti

Later that day, there were a few deliveries at the office that came from the Brotherhood. Inside were the heads of all those that had been involved in the hit made on me, with a letter asking for forgiveness and to remember of the good that the Brotherhood has done to the community as a whole.

Kaden made sure all those that had been found to have been involved in the sordid affair were accounted for.

He then sent back a formal letter indicating that he was not going to pursue a war any further with the Brotherhood itself, as the culprit had paid for their crimes, but that Blakemore would not resume its position under the Accord and would stay neutral in all werewolf affairs. That channels of communications were not dead between the Brotherhood and Blakemore, but trust no longer existed.

I was glad he was not pursuing more conflicts with them, as the ramifications of this would be disastrous to the werewolf population as a whole.

I knew of his crusade against the black market, and felt no sympathy for any of them. I even scoured maps with my sight, trying to find a few they might have overlooked. I wanted them gone for good. There would probably be a time where this industry would find a resurgence,

maybe under a new incarnation, operating differently than it did. But I knew now that what it had been was dead and slowly being erased. It would never be the same

I visited the girl often, we had to find an interpreter, as she only knew, Korean. It turned out her name was Sena, she was ten, and Tamarak told me, an orphan. She never spoke of her parents, but apparently, they had been taken apart and sold off.

I offered for her to stay here.

I was worried about her a lot.

What happened in this basement was horrid to anyone, but what that could mean to a child was ever worst. And the potential trauma made me shudder at the thought.

I had been extremely lucky in that I had not suffered much, compared to any other who had been dragged in there before me.

Kaden and I reached to a few, and Alpha and Luna Lostcrest, of the Lostcrest pack had offered to adopt her. Their pack had probably the highest number of hybrids other than Blakmore and Blakewoods, and they had no qualms into adopting a non-werewolf child, and Myung-Hee Lostcrest was part Korean and fluent in the language.

They had visited her a few times. It took a while, but eventually I saw it, the beginning of a connection building between them. I knew they would cherish her. They had had only three sons and Myung-Hee had been very keen on a daughter that she could spoil.

Tamarak, on the other hand, had been very quiet.

Of them all, he had been the most injured, but his healing abilities even surpassed that of werewolves.

Drakes were known to be quite solitary, but they were also known for their magical properties and had been hunted fairly severely.

“If you want,” said Kaden to him one day, “Blakemore as this big-ass mountain on its territory. It’s not very populated because it’s a little too steep. I wouldn’t mind someone up there, capable of having a good lookout around.”

Tamarak scoffed. “My kind is not very good at being retained into little werewolf territories.”

Kaden gave him the full square-kilometer of Blakemore. That made Tamarak’s eyebrow twitch.

“How about this?” said Kaden. “All of it, you can roam, do your thing, not part of any of my packs per se, more as a freestanding Lord of Blakemore. You rule yourself and as long as you don’t do anything against our laws, we let you be. You give us a heads up from your vantage point if anything bad is coming our way, and help in time of need, and in exchange I have a fancy house built for you up there, and you receive food and everything you might need.”

Tamarak was silent for a while.

“Think about it. It’s not a bad offer. You get a well-protected and defended territory, luxuries, everything you need, and we ask for help once in a while, win-win for both of us.”

“I don’t know,” said Tamarak.

“Give him time,” I said to Kaden. “He will say yes.”

Tamarak gave me an odd look but said nothing, Kaden smiled at that.

“Well, take your time,” he said. “You’ll get used to it soon enough.”

* * * * *

“How are things on your side?” asked Kaden to his laptop in the drawing room.

I brought coffee for him and tea for me into the drawing room.

“Much better. Or at least under-control,” said Michael’s voice from the computer. “Actually, I want to talk to you about something.”

“Sure,” said Kaden as he took his cup from me.

“Oh, hey there Elaeya. We haven’t had time to chat, but I want to say, I’m really glad you’re back and okay.”

“Thank you,” I told him. “And your request will be hard to comply for without some work from your part.”

He blinked a little taken aback.

“What is this request?” asked Kaden.

I sat next to him on the love seat.

“Well—,” Michael hesitated somewhat, Kaden did not push and waited for him to open up. “I’ve been thinking a lot lately. Three of my brothers are now members of Blakemore. I know I don’t have the same to offer as Boisclair, but I think allying ourselves, I mean more permanently, could be an option. I’m offering Stonewillow to become independent territory of Blakemore. I know where far, and we can handle ourselves pretty well generally, but the help we’ve received since the attack as changed everything. Plus, I’m not an idiot, I know that the name of Blakemore scares a lot of people, lately even more than before. That alone could become the best deterrent to any further attacks.”

Kaden thought about it. He was not as averse to the idea of expansion as before. I suppose he had nothing to salvage with the Brotherhood anymore.

“Look, I get the familial link, and the help it can give you and everything. But from a management standpoint, it would be unwise for me to do this unless you have a minimum of territory and population size to sustain this long distance.”

Michael nodded and they went on for a while talking numbers.

“Give me a bit of time,” Michael finally said after a while. “Don’t shut the idea down too quickly, let me talk to a few Alphas. I don’t think I’m the only one thinking in that vein. Maybe I could get the numbers you need.”

“I’m not promising anything, but I can wait too. Meanwhile, I will keep sending you support when I can.”

“Thank you.”

Jean-Philippe had shown his cards one day.

“I kinda expected for Boisclair to get the mindlink too,” he admitted.

“Dude,” said Darren. “You just signed a piece of paper. We did this whole blood ritual thing to get that. Don’t expect things to fall from the sky on your lap.”

“I’m not,” he admitted. It was Friday dinner and we were all in the packhouse’s formal dining room. “I just kinda hope, something would happen. It would be pretty nice to have that.”

“I could maybe happen,” said my mother.

Everyone looked at her.

“I can’t promise anything, but we could try.”

Jean-Philippe started to cheer.

My mother cut it out. “It can’t come from you though, but her,” she said looking at Jasmine.

She was taken by surprise but her and Jean-Philipped talked a lot. She had decided not to go to Boiclair right after her birthday which was in a few days, but prepare here first. But Jean-Philippe accepted to take her under his pack and make her Luna early.

Three days after Jasmine’s eighteen birthday, my mother did the ceremony in the woods where I had mine. Some of Boislcair sent the live video home as the full pack couldn’t come here.

In the end, I marked Jasmine’s face, like mine had been. Making a connection between us. And it worked.

When Jean-Philippe realised the success of it, he took Jasmine’s face between his hands and kissed her, then jumped around and hugged Kaden, who looked at him weirdly.

“Oh, I’ll kiss you,” he told me smiling, coming my way.

Kaden put a hand on his chest and gave him a look, so Jean-Philippe turned around, dipped Jasmine and kissed her to a lot of cheering from Boisclair and catcall from Blakemore.

“French idiot,” muttered Kaden.

“Well, you were quite enthusiastic yourself when you gained mindlink.”

He circled his arms around me and pressed my back against his front.

“I can contain myself better than this,” he said.

I smiled. Maybe I’d have to remind him of our wedding and excursion in the woods.

Things changed slowly at home, but at the same time, it did not feel like it. It came naturally. My life gaining its rhythm as winter settled for good.

It’s only after you have one that you really see the impact of a home. You never know what you are missing until you experience it. This is mine now. I am glad I did not run that night when a stranger cornered me in the woods. It had led me to a difficult journey, but nothing of value comes for free. That is what it is to live. The only way to never suffer is to never live. As you would not only sacrifice the pain, but also the joy, the happiness, the love. They are things in this world worth suffering for, and combat worth fighting to elevate that pain. There were people worth going to war for. There are challenges worth facing. I faced mine.

This is not the end of my story, only the beginning.